This story is heavily inspired by 🔥***BURN THE STARS***🔥 ***COMPLETE 24 HOUR STARCLAN FRUSTRATION MAP*** *on YouTube.*

Swearing ahead, please be advised.

This fanfic is subject to change. Note: if you see a "(/)", that is a bookmark for easier editing.

Thank you for understanding and patience. 💙

Enjoy! :3

To everyone who still has the vigor

to push for their best life

and to push for victory

despite all odds and defeats.

→ *Allegiances* →

RIVERCLAN

Leader ~ *Mockingstar*

Deputy ~ *Fringeflight*

→ apprentice ~ *Rapidpaw*

Medicine Cat ~ *Goldleaf*

Medicine Cat Apprentice ~ *n/a*

~ Warriors ~

Willowfern

→ apprentice ~ *Shatterpaw*

Shelltooth

→ apprentice ~ *Silverpaw*

Fallowpounce

Burningsun

Greyflower

→ apprentice ~ *Levelpaw*

Blackstorm

Fennecmuzzle

Blisteringheat

Phasemoon

→ apprentice ~ *Troutpaw*

Beigeshine

~ Apprentices ~

Shatterpaw

Rapidpaw

Silverpaw

Troutpaw

Levelpaw

~ Queens ~

Nightshade [Burningsun's kit(s) expected: leafbare]

Morningdawn [Mother to Blackstorm's kit(s): Pigmentkit]

Elders ~

Tidestrike

Whiptail

SKYCLAN

Leader ~ *Kingfisherstar*

Deputy ~ *Chasingflight*

Medicine Cat ~ *Gullclaw*

Medicine Cat Apprentice ~ *Nightpaw*

~ Warriors ~

Mistfury

Hazeldust

Dustypetal

Spiderfang

Poisonberry

Flurryclaw

→ apprentice ~ *Strikerpaw*

Breezeywhisper

Rustlesong

→ apprentice ~ *Twilightpaw*

Rainsong

Jackalsnarl

~ Apprentices ~

Strikerpaw

Twilightpaw

~ Queens ~

Sunnyfray [Mistfury's kit(s) expected: leafbare]

Elders ~

Fuzzflight

Wildstorm

SHADOWCLAN

Leader ~ *Sagestar*

Deputy ~ *Gorgewhistle*

Medicine Cat ~ *Shiverwing*

Medicine Cat Apprentice ~ *Flashpaw*

~ Warriors ~

Lightningclaw

→ apprentice ~ *Seapaw*

Nightshadow

Blackdapple

→ apprentice ~ *Burnetpaw*

Balebite

Violetsweep

Cicadawing

Ebonydusk

Bramblelight

Dappleflurry

→ apprentice ~ *Fallenpaw*

Cloudspot

Hickoryspin

~ Apprentices ~

Seapaw

Fallenpaw

Burnetpaw

~ Queens ~

Frozendusk [mother to Cicadawing's kit(s): Currentkit]

Elders ~

Snowpatch

Stormfury

THUNDERCLAN

Leader ~ *Bellastar*

Deputy ~ *Magnoliaquake*

Medicine Cat ~ *Hollowsun*

Medicine Cat Apprentice ~ *Cloudypaw*

~ Warriors ~

Tigerspring

Shineingdrop

Snowcrystal

Drizzleflurry

Skybeam

→ apprentice ~ *Clearpaw*

Rainysong

Sorrelclaw

Flarespring

Frostywind

Embersong

→ apprentice ~ *Sandypaw*

Blossomgrace

Petaldust

~ Apprentices ~

Clearpaw

Sandypaw

~ Queens ~

Duskshine [Flarespring's kit(s) expected: leafbare]

Elders ~

Ghostwhisper

Deerpounce

WINDCLAN

Leader ~ *Drizzlestar*

Deputy ~ *Diamondfury*

Medicine Cat ~ *Splotchedfoot*

Medicine Cat Apprentice ~ *Heatherpaw*

~ Warriors ~

Frozenstreak

Applefall

Rushingwind

Gustflurry

→ apprentice ~ *Gorsepaw*

Moonglow

Darksky

Snowfall

Dawnfreeze

Mysticglow

→ apprentice ~ *Crowberrypaw*

~ Apprentices ~

Crowberrypaw

Gorsepaw

~ Queens ~

Blackbird [Frozenstreak's kit(s) expected: newleaf]

Briarsun

Elders ~

Bogprickle

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS

Charm

Fury

Blackout

Victor (Vick, Ace)

Blitz

Storm

Quiver

Comet

Prologue →

`` ***The Promise***

The air was cold, the rain was harsh, and the river was rising.

The nursery was frigid, the kits seeking shelter in their mothers' fur.

Flakelight curled tighter around her two surviving kits, tirelessly licking their tiny shivering heads.

"Mama?" one of the kits, a pale gray tabby, was looking up at her, blinking his sharp, ice–blue eyes. "Mama, I'm warm. Save your energy for sister."

As if to prove a point, his sister, a brown tabby she-cat, started to have yet another spasm of coughs, her small body shaking as it was plagued by the sickness of whitecough.

"I'll warm *both* of you." Flakelight licked her head even fiercer, and only noticed a few moments in how her little tom–kit was licking his sister as well, just as tirelessly. Perhaps, even more tirelessly, with the frantic love of a kit trying to fix the world.

I can see what warrior you'll be in your eyes, my young love, and that's promising.

When the she–kit's hacks finally eased, there was silence in the nursery once more. Then, a small— "Mama?"

"I'm here, Rapidkit." Flakelight nuzzled her tom–kit, but Rapidkit's expression was serious.

"Mama, can I make you a promise?"

Flakelight was taken aback by the sudden question. She blinked her own blue eyes at him, then nodded slightly, smiling softly. "If it's one that you can keep."

Rapidkit suddenly locked his eyes to hers, unblinking. There was an intensity in those depths that Flakelight had hardly seen before. "When I grow big, I'll protect and take care of you and Sparrowkit. I will become the strongest warrior in *all* the Clans so that no one can *ever* hurt *any* of you again — not even the weather. I'm gonna become like Papa!"

Flakelight's smile deepened. She nuzzled her son fondly, feeling both amused and warmed. She chuckled. "Of *course* you will, my dearest."

"I'm *serious*!" Rapidkit looked indignant. "I'll protect you and sis'. Papa will be proud and even come back! I'll make sure, Mama."

"If you will make sure. …" Flakelight didn't continue. She nuzzled Rapidkit again. "You're brave, but what if being a warrior is not what StarClan has in store for you?"

“I don’t care.” Rapidkit murmured, leaning into his mother’s warm flank, perhaps for the last time. “I *will* become a warrior and *protect* both of you. No matter what my destiny is. I promise.”

Chapter I →

`` ***The First Assessment***

I promise. ...

“Rise and shine, the day for assessments is fine!”

Rapidpaw groaned and rolled onto his stomach. He’d been awake for a while — paws twitchy with nerves. He’d tried calming himself with a deep breath, clinging to the promise he made to his mother, Flakelight.

The promise that he had made to her the night before she got greencough and died seven sunrises later.

I’ll protect both of you. ... No matter what my destiny is.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaapidpawwwwwwwww!”

“Ugh, I’m coming, I’m coming!” Rapidpaw made a quick effort to groom himself before squeezing out of the apprentices’ den. The sunlight dazzled him for a moment, and nearly

resulted in him barreling into Silverpaw — the one who had been calling to him for about five minutes straight and the one who was also known as his best friend.

"There you are!" Silverpaw's long, silvery fur was still ruffled from sleep, but his blue-gray eyes were shining. "I thought you would never wake up!"

Rapidpaw nudged him playfully. "Shut it. I was … *tired.*"

Silverpaw widened his eyes in a mock of shock. "Whoa … Rapidpaw, *tired? Of all cats???*"

"Rapidpaw!" A sharper mew cut through the crisp air, cutting off any response the youth could do to his best friend.

"Gotta go." Rapidpaw quickly whisked away instead.

"Good luck!" Silverpaw squeaked after him, and Rapidpaw lifted his tail in acknowledgement before trotting to Fringeflight, his mentor and deputy.

"You are late." Fringeflight's forest–green gaze was stern as he looked down at his apprentice. "Slept in?"

Rapidpaw suddenly felt self–conscious. "Yeah. …"

Fringeflight's gaze seemed to soften into amusement. "It is okay, it happens." However, his eyes narrowed slightly, now. "But warriors do not sleep in. Now, follow me, your assessment is far overdue."

Bad start.

Head low, Rapidpaw followed Fringeflight to the river. However, he let his gaze quickly flick to the sky before looking forward once again. How had he let himself wait until sunhigh to come out? His assessment was supposed to begin at sun*rise*!

"Okay." Fringeflight got right to business. He sat down, curling his tail neatly around his paws. "This assessment will last two days." He nodded to the river. "Today, you will go and dive into the rapids. Your goal is to catch at least 1 young carp and 3 young trout. If you catch more, congratulations, have no doubt that you passed. I will be watching, though, you just will not see me. I will pull you out in five minutes. Understood?"

Rapidpaw nodded. "Understood."

"So, what are you waiting for?" Fringeflight stood up, tail still around his hindquarters. "Go!"

Rapidpaw turned and slid into the river with a soft '*plop*', movements smoother than the currents themselves.

Water muted the surface world, the whispers of rushing water filling his eardrums. The river's current swept him down with a force he barely fought, but he wasn't phased. Minnows were darting around, but not a single juvenile trout or carp.

Patience is key. He remembered, but couldn't suppress an inner growl of frustration.

He resurfaced before quickly taking a huge gulp of oxygen and diving under once again.

The carp — though small — practically swam up his nose this time, catching him off guard. Quickly recovering, he rendered it helpless before plopping it onto the bank. A purr escaped from him, and he wasted no time to dive into the currents once again.

The trout were the same. Rapidpaw's eyes widened as he spotted three of them at the same time, swimming right in his current. He gritted his teeth and skillfully snapped at one, taking it to his jaws and swiftly hooked his claws on the two others — all in one fluid, deadly movement.

Yes!

Living up to his prefix, he made a rapid kill and resurfaced, flopping his lifeless triple young trout beside his carp. He stood there, huffing and puffing, catching his breath as he felt the cool river's water stream from his soaked pelt. His ice–blue eyes were wide and filled with awe at his own work.

That's… really it… ?

I ... I did it.

I completed it! My first assessment is completed!

He gave a little bounce.

Thank you so, so, so, so much, StarClan, for this prey!

"Wow, Rapidpaw! Just wow!" Fringeflight's green eyes were wide as well. But his gaze? It was with pride instead of awe … and admiration. "You did that in less than a minute! Your skills are of a true warrior's — I'm even tempted to pass you right here." He added the last comment as a sort of joke. However, he quickly collected himself and returned to his usual collected self, though his dark eyes were still shining. "Great job, Rapidpaw. I'm very proud of you. Your next assessment will be tomorrow."

Rapidpaw's tail was stuck right in the air and his head was high now. As he stood over his catch, his self–confidence rose with every word Fringeflight praised him with.

I did it ... !

Rapidpaw dipped his head. "Thanks *so* much, Fringeflight." He picked up his prey happily and trotted back to camp.

I passed my first assessment!

He let out a purr.

I'm gonna be a warrior now!

A small part of him was telling him to not get his hopes up because this was only his first half.

Rapidpaw didn't listen, though. Worries never got him anywhere useful.

"Hi, Rapidpaw!!!" Silverpaw bounced over as soon as Rapidpaw stepped into camp. His eyes widened at Rapidpaw's catch. "Whoa! What a haul!" He happily made little jumps around Rapidpaw, his eyes glowing like an excited kit's. "Well?" He asked when Rapidpaw had dropped his prey onto the fresh-kill pile. "Did you pass?? Did you really *pass*???"

Rapidpaw's tail tip curled and he lifted his head proudly. "Yep, I passed! This is only the first half, but I passed!"

"*Eeeeeeee*!!" Silverpaw screeched, bouncing around Rapidpaw once again and clapping his forepaws together. "You passed! I *knew* you would! Now I just have to have *my* assessment and we'll be made warriors *together*!!" The small tom's joy was building by the second, making Rapidpaw tempted to bounce with him. "This is *so* exciting!!! *Isn't this exciting*?!?!"

"Of *course* this is exciting!" Rapidpaw beamed at his best friend. He purred. "I can't *wait* for us to be made warriors together. That would be so *sick*!"

“Yes!!!” Silverpaw bounced so high that for a second Rapidpaw thought he would touch the sky.

“Silverpaw!” The light mew of Silverpaw’s mentor sounded a little way away, cutting off the conversation.

“Oh, yeah!” Silverpaw’s eyes widened. “Coming, Shelltooth!”

“Good luck!” Rapidpaw called happily to his friend, dearly wishing that the silver tom would pass his assessment as well.

Silverpaw waved his goodbye and trotted off after Shelltooth, his tail drooping with nerves. The white she beckoned him with her head to come to her side, then they were gone.

Rapidpaw turned back to the fresh–kill pile and drew out a trout — one of his catches. Licking his lips, he started to munch on the aquatic kill, planning to save the other for his companion.

A moment passed like that. His ears twitched, then, when they picked up the hushed voices whispering beside the leader’s den. Rapidpaw turned to the direction of the sound, curious. Fringeflight and Mockingstar’s heads were bowed in serious conversation, their voices low and their eyes never leaving each other’s. And Rapidpaw? He couldn’t help but satisfy his inquiries, so his ears stayed swerved to them.

"… A sign from StarClan. It has to be him." Mockingstar had been murmuring. His gray and white fur twitched with apparent tension.

Fringeflight glanced around cautiously with only his gaze, the greens tracing camp warily. "Let us talk about this in a more … *private* place, shall we." It didn't sound like a request.

Mockingstar nodded sharply. Without any comment of affirmation or any of the sort, he subtly flicked his tail. His deputy ducked into the leader's den after him, and there was no more.

He blinked, confused, and Mockingstar turned back to catch his eye. His leader's green eyes narrowed thoughtfully, then he whisked inside after his high rank.

Rapidpaw's brow furrowed. Were they *hiding* something? A suspicion was starting to make itself known to him—

*Were they talking about ... **me**?*

Chapter II →

`` ***The Second Half***

Eyes focused, Rapidpaw tensed, raised paw at ready — then struck, flinging a shining fish from the river. Catching it mid–air, the tom slapped it onto the ground and unsheathed his claws. Pressing down, a crisp '*crack*' sounded, not quite reverberating through the air but through his ears still. It flailed once before going still.

"Great job!" Silverpaw was sitting over his own catch, beaming as his best friend made another kill. "I wonder when your second assessment will start?"

"Probably in a few minutes." Rapidpaw guessed, glancing up at the sky. His paws prickled with apprehension. Soon, he would be a warrior. And finally — oh finally — he would fulfill the promise he had made so long ago.

The day of Rapidpaw's first assessment had passed in barely a blink, especially after Silverpaw came charging into camp, beaming as per usual and announcing his triumph over his own appraisal to the entire camp. Mockingstar had smiled fondly and had told the two best friends that he would wait until Rapidpaw passed as well before starting their ceremony. Now, the two were practicing their fishing skills beside the river, together.

"What's it gonna be on?" Silverpaw tipped his head to the side, curious. "Did Fringeflight tell you?"

Rapidpaw shook his head, helplessly clueless. "Nope." He then looked in the direction of camp distantly, pursing his lips. "Hopefully he won't make it *too-too* hard. …"

Silverpaw waved a front paw dismissively. "Pfft, nahhh. Don't worry about it. Besides," he nudged his friend with a smile, "even if the task *is* hard, you'll pass it." His tail shot into the air. "I *know* you will!"

Rapidpaw returned that smile, just as sincerely. *You're a good friend, Silv.* Just as he opened his jaws to reply, though, the deep voice of his deputy sounded from behind.

"Rapidpaw! There you are." Fringeflight emerged from the bushes. "C'mon. It's time for your final assessment."

"Okay!" Rapidpaw called, tilting his head back to acknowledge his mentor. The juvenile jumped eagerly to his paws. "Coming!"

"*Oooooh*!!" Silverpaw bounced on his toes again, his voice sing–song. "Good luuuck!!" He winked at Rapidpaw teasingly. "Not that you'll need it, anyways."

Rapidpaw snorted, eyeing his friend teasingly. "Oh, quit it. Don't jinx me now!" And with that, he trotted off, Silverpaw letting out a laugh behind him.

Fringeflight nodded briskly, then padded off, his tail flicking from one side to the other. Seemingly, he didn't quite notice the twos' wholesome dynamic, or at least paid no attention to it.

Rapidpaw hesitated. Something was … off, he felt. Fringeflight's steps were too stiff, his tail too twitchy. Was the brown deputy *anxious*?

He snorted softly to himself. Fringeflight, *anxious*?

C'mon, Rapidpaw! Quit being ridiculous.

So, he did just that. Soon, however, mentor and apprentice halted and—

"Okay." Fringeflight murmured in a low voice, seemingly to himself. "This seems okay." He turned to Rapidpaw, his gaze unreadable. "Your task today will be to beat me in a fight to test your strength. Then, you will need to climb at least two trees — *fluidly* — to test your agility."

Rapidpaw nodded, though it was a slow type of nod. One with acceptance, but confusion still lingered. "Wait. Why test me with *trees*?" He asked aloud. "Agility is already tested with fighting. Besides, why on earth would a *RiverClan* cat climb trees?"

Fringeflight didn't answer. Instead, he silently whisked into position.

Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side, now beyond confused. *What in all the lake is up with him today ... ?* He sighed and tensed his muscles. *Oh, well. The only thing important is that I pass.* His gaze narrowed intently. *And for that, I have to focus.*

He mirrored his mentor, lowering himself into a battle stance, paws placed perfectly onto the soil below. Then, at just the wrong time, he suddenly felt nervous. Fringeflight's eyes were fixed on him, his gaze more acute than he had ever seen him.

You have to pass, Rapidpaw. He took one deep breath.

*You **have** to pass.*

He saw Fringeflight's hind paw muscles twitch. *Looks like he is about to pounce.*

Why is he hesitating?

Then, Fringeflight charged.

Caught off guard, Rapidpaw waited for the last second, but to his advantage. He flawlessly rolled to the side and quickly kicked his mentor's flanks with his powerful hind leg, scoring a grunt from the stout tom and sending him on a rolling journey.

Rapidpaw didn't give him a chance to catch his breath. He leapt, landing hard on Fringeflight's flank and pinning him down, and his claws whisked to hover just above his mentor's throat — claws sheathed, but close.

The two toms sat there, panting softly. Then, Fringeflight let out a low grumble. “That’s all you got? I thought you were stronger than that.”

Rapidpaw’s eyes widened in a mix of shock and indignation. “Wh—!! What do you *mean* ‘that’s all you got’?” He spluttered. “I literally *just* beat you. *Flawlessly* at that!”

“You need to be more tactful.” Fringeflight muttered again instead of answering. “I could have easily barreled you over.”

“But you *didn’t.*” Rapidpaw flattened his ears. “I beat you, like you said I had to, so you *have* to pass me on this part!” Why was his mentor being so difficult?

Fringeflight grunted, not at all convincing. “Fine, fine, very well, keep your fur on.” He shifted under Rapidpaw’s grip. He rolled his eyes. “You can let me go now.”

Rapidpaw let out an irritated snort and hopped off his mentor, who immediately sprang up to his paws and dusted himself off.

“Okay.” Fringeflight announced when he had gotten all the grit off his fur. Rapidpaw hadn’t even bothered to clean himself off — there was no need to — and now he pricked his ears to attention once again. “Now, see those two tall pines over there?”

Rapidpaw squinted towards the horizon and spotted them. “Yeah.”

"Climb them fluidly." Fringeflight instructed.

Rapidpaw glanced at his mentor. "But they're on the *ShadowClan* border."

"But not *in* the ShadowClan border." Fringeflight returned coolly.

Rapidpaw's tail started flicking in frustration, but he obeyed anyways. Stalking over to the border and hauling himself up a tree, he showered bark from his claws to down below.

"Great *StarClan*, be more careful!" Fringeflight called out loudly from the ground, shaking out his fur grumpily.

Rapidpaw didn't even twitch an ear as he continued to propel himself upward. He reached the spikes quickly and flawlessly, puffing out his chest proudly from a thick, jutting branch. He crouched and waggled his hindquarters, about to leap into the next tree, when Fringeflight called up to him once again—

"Up and down!"

Rapidpaw gritted his teeth, but wordlessly set down for the base of the tree anyways, one eye on the other tree that he was tasked to climb. He easily hopped onto the next tree as well, though, scrambling up and down it like a squirrel would have in his place. Finally, he jumped down, facing Fringeflight, his head high. "Well? *Convinced*?"

Fringeflight said nothing, though. His eyes were thoughtful, assessing Rapidpaw with a dark green gaze. Finally, he grunted once again and stalked away.

Rapidpaw felt his ears pin back. What was *wrong* with Fringeflight? Why was he acting like this? Then, for the second time, Rapidpaw snorted ill–temperedly. Deciding to not bother with it, he followed his mentor back to camp.

"Hi!!!" Silverpaw greeted Rapidpaw with a bounce as soon as he had stepped back into camp. "Did you pass, did you pass?!?! *Oooooooohhhh* I *bet* you passed!!"

Rapidpaw let a small smile across his muzzle as he and Silverpaw touched noses in greeting. "Hey, Silverpaw." He then pulled away. Thinking about Fringeflight's behavior, he couldn't help but feel a prick of doubt. "I … dunno." He admitted. "Fringeflight didn't say anything."

Silverpaw's eyes widened and his face fell. "What do you mean?" He murmured, downcast by his friend's admission. "Did you do something wrong? Surely not! Fringeflight *must* see what a *promising* apprentice you are!"

Rapidpaw's ears twitched irritably and he looked away, remembering Fringeflight's completely unfair judgment of his assessment. His paws began to prickle again, though, as unease finally settled in. *That was* ***not*** *Fringeflight. He's always so fair … I don't understand what was so different about today!*

Silverpaw's panic was clearly starting to rise when Rapidpaw kept silent. His voice was barely a breath when he found his tongue once again. "Rapidpaw … you *have* to pass!"

Rapidpaw still couldn't meet his friend's eyes. It was bad enough that Fringeflight hadn't told him anything about his assessment, bridging up doubts along the way. He knew how much Silverpaw wanted to be made a warrior with him, and Silverpaw knew how much Rapidpaw had to pass the assessments. But what could he say when his friend's words sounded so much like his own?

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

"Let all cats old enough to swim gather beneath Highstump for a Clan meeting!"

The sky was clouded, the moon hidden along with the boundless stars. It smelled of rain, but Rapidpaw was too disquieted to give any thought to it.

The youth slinked out of the apprentice's den, every pawstep sending butterflies of apprehension into his belly. Silverpaw was waiting outside already, his long silvery fur freshly groomed and looking quite satisfied with the world, as usual. Casting a glance at his friend, Rapidpaw followed him out into the RiverClan clearing.

Mockingstar looked down at Silverpaw, Fringeflight at his side, The leader wasn't meeting Rapidpaw's eyes. "Silverpaw, step forward."

Silverpaw, his long, silvery fur fluffed out in excitement, skip–trotted to the front of the crowd, his blue–gray eyes glowing in the darkness and practically shivering with excitement.

And at that, the high ranker began. "I, Mockingstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down at this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn. Silverpaw, do you promise to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Silverpaw answered, his words a breath of disbelief.

Mockingstar showed no emotion, though. "Then, by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Silverpaw, from this moment on you shall be known as Silverbrook. StarClan honors your kindness and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

"Silverbrook! Silverbrook! Silverbrook!" The Clan erupted in cheers.

Rapidpaw started chanting his friend's name as well, but then his voice faded as he realized that the ceremony was coming to an end. *Wait a moment. ... What about me?* The young'un blinked up at Mockingstar, fluffing out his fur and lifting his tail, trying to seem bigger. Maybe the leader hadn't noticed him?

Mockingstar didn't even bat an eye, though. He leaped off Highstump as the cheers died down, seemingly completely ignoring him.

Rapidpaw's tail sank, but his fur was starting to rise in agitation. "Mockingstar, *wait*!" He rushed over to his leader and blocked his path, his blue eyes narrowing as he gazed into the other's bright but cloudy green eyes. "What about *my* ceremony?"

Mockingstar seemed to finally notice him, but his gaze was unwavering. "Oh! 'Ello, Rapidpaw." He blinked, as if processing Rapidpaw's words, then asked, "What ceremony? You were apprenticed to Goldleaf, remember?" Then, he added in a murmur, "Or did I not tell you that … ? I was positive that I did!"

But Rapidpaw wasn't listening anymore. It felt as though Mockingstar's words had physically dealt a blow to his stomach, making him flinch visibly. He stood there, breathless and stunned. He was apprenticed to— "… *Goldleaf?*" The medicine cat? Since *when*? Then, his ears flattened and his neck fur rose, hot indignation boiling up in his stomach as a light drizzle began to fall. One word, low and dangerous— "... *What*?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Mockingstar blinked again. "So I didn't tell you. …" He opened his jaws to say something else, but Rapidpaw didn't let him.

"What do you *mean* 'apprenticed to Goldleaf'? My mentor is *Fringeflight*, your *deputy*!" Mockingstar opened his jaws to say something once more, but Rapidpaw raged on. "I just finished my assessment*s today*, and you apprenticed me *to a medicine cat right when the ceremony is due*? Without my *consent* as well?!"

"It's StarClan's will, Rapidpaw." A soft voice flitted through their conversation — or now argument, more like. Goldleaf pushed herself to Mockingstar's side, her short ginger pelt sleek like usual. Her green–blue eyes brimmed with sympathy. "They gave me a sign about you. I'm certain that this is what they want. … I know that this is all very sudden but … what can we do? We can only listen and comply."

Rapidpaw was shaking his head. His heart was speeding up along with his breath and his fur was bushing out even more. In fact, the apprentice felt *so* furious that he really *couldn't* listen, even if he tried. "*Why* would *StarClan* send a *message* ***now***?? *How* do I *know* that you two aren't just *postponing* my ceremony for *no apparent reason*?!"

"They didn't send a message *now*." Goldleaf explained quietly. "They sent it a few sunrises before your assessments began."

Rapidpaw felt his paws twitch. He wanted to lash out at something — *anything*. The longer Goldleaf talked, the hotter his fury burned. After a moment— "*Fine*." He snarled, his voice soft but menacing. "But I ***will*** *show you*." He leveled his paw to their heights and pointed at Mockingstar and Goldleaf in turn. "I will show ***both*** *of you* that I can be a warrior, destiny or no destiny! You just ***count on it***!" With that, the enraged youth whipped around and stormed to the exit of RiverClan's camp, ignoring the protesting calls from the high rankers.

"Rapidpaw! Where're you going? *What happened*?? *Rapidpaw*!!" Silverbrook's voice was a panicked call, but Rapidpaw ignored him, too.

Chapter III →

`` ***Another One***

It seemed like forever before Rapidpaw skidded to a stop, but it really was just a few minutes. For a moment, the apprentice stood there, huffing and puffing, catching his breath. Drizzle turned to rain, dotting his pale tabby pelt and dragging his spirit down along with the droplets. He sat onto his haunches and buried his face into his paws.

StarClan—

"*Why*?!" He yowled out into the pouring night. Hopelessness and frustration turned to hot fury and the youth spun around, lashing out at a nearby tree. Bark flew in the wake of his claws, four deep gouges scoring into the brown surface. A growl escaped him, the memory of Mockingstar's dismissive tone bright in his mind and igniting his lividity ever more.

He flexed his claws, the white daggers on the verge of doubling the mini canyons, when a scent wafted over his nose and the prodigy froze. He snapped his gaze around, his nose twitching and his ears pricked. Was that … ?

Rogue *scent?*

Rapidpaw sniffed around the bark that he had scattered onto the ground, forcing himself to concentrate. The scent was strong there. He padded to the next tree and — more carefully this time — picked off a chip of brown with one claw. It was even stronger there. Excitement starting to replace his rage, the young apprentice–not–apprentice picked one tree after another, tracking the harsh tang like it was prey just waiting to be found. His paws tingled. An idea sparked — sudden and blinding, like sunlight splitting storm clouds.

Yes! Yes, this is my chance! I can track down the rogues and prove that I can be good as any warrior! Even better! The best warrior! No matter what the stars say!

Rapidpaw tracked the scent closer to the border, then the next tree carried none. He carefully scented the other trees and found that the scent was turning around — doubling back onto itself.

*Wait ... **turning around**?*

His ears twitched in irritation, but he followed it anyway. Turning back to the direction of camp, he stiffened with one paw in the air when a twig snapped in the bushes to his left. He whirled around, gaze scanning the foliage around him. Carefully parting his jaws, he scented the air.

The rouge scent was strong, no doubt, but there was also a stronger RiverClan scent here. Another branch snapped, and Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. Cat scent washed over his nose, and he growled softly.

Did Mockingstar follow me? Or Silverbrook?

If anyone, he would much rather it be Fringeflight. He needed to get things straight with his mentor. *Even though I would most likely snap at him.* And rightly so.

Rustling and muttering snapped him out of his thoughts once again. Then, a small black cat blundered out of the bushes, shaking one of his back paws and hissing, "StarClan forsaken vine!" When the long, green tendril finally tumbled off, he pricked his ears and his head snapped up to look at Rapidpaw. His green eyes widened in seemingly surprise, and perhaps panic. "Oops. … Uh— hi, Rapidpaw … ! What are you doing here, hehe?"

"Patrolling." Rapidpaw lied. His tail curled, suspicion sparking along with the movement. "What are *you* doing here?" He couldn't see the other cat's features in the dark.

"Uh, nothing too important, you know, heh."

Rapidpaw's ears twitched doubtfully. "*Really?*" His tail started flicking as he looked right through the other. He let a pause pass by before lowering his voice. "More like *following me*, eh?"

The other tom's ears twitched nervously. "Me, follow *you?* Never, unless you're going somewhere. … Are you?"

Rapidpaw's whiskers twitched, his eyes narrowing even more. "Why would *you* want to know? Besides," he added, "isn't it a bit *late* to go somewhere?"

"Uh, no, not really— you know, like— um, I— oh! Uh— night hunting! Yeah, definitely that."

Rapidpaw gave him a doubtful look. "Fine." This cat was not going to waste his time. He turned to continue tracking the foreign scent. "Happy night hunting, I guess."

"W–wait!"

Rapidpaw turned around again, giving an annoyed huff. "What?"

The cat's ears twitched, seemingly in an embarrassed way. "Can I … go with you?"

Rapidpaw was caught off guard — such so that he couldn't think of a lie for a fat second. A seemingly stranger wanted to go with him. For what? Did this cat know where Rapidpaw was even going? Rapidpaw *himself* didn't even know where he was going. Besides, if he did and the younger *did* go with Rapidpaw — if they *did* find the rogues — this tom would get all the credit while all of Rapidpaw's struggles would be thrown into the shadows once again.

But it will be dangerous. Rapidpaw reflected. *I might need some help.*

It was worth the risk. What Rapidpaw could *not* risk was the indignity of not being made a warrior once again. Besides, he had told this cat that he was patrolling. "No." He told the visitor coldly, and turned around to stalk to the rogue path once again. "I can … patrol on my own."

The smaller cat's pawsteps pattered rapidly on the ground as he struggled to catch up with him. "H–hey! Wait— please, man, come on."

Rapidpaw ignored him and padded on.

The cat sounded like he was practically crying, pleading Rapidpaw like a madman. "Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaase!!!!"

Rapidpaw would usually feel sympathetic and let him go with him by now, but not today. Today — or tonight — he needed to do things alone. Annoyance was rising up inside him, though, so he whipped around and hissed, "Why do you even *want* to go so badly?"

The tom paused, clearly thinking of an explanation. "Well— uh— you might need help on your— uh— patrol." The tom shifted his paws, his tail twitching with nerves. "It's gonna be an adventure! You *are* going on an adventure, right?"

Rapidpaw turned up his nose, keeping his secret stubbornly. "I told you." He said stiffly. "I'm *border marking*."

The tom was clearly trying his best to change Rapidpaw's mind. "Hey, uh— maybe it would be better if you knew my name, right?"

"It won't make a difference." Rapidpaw attempted to turn and walk away once again.

"Maybe you have heard my name before?" The tom padded after Rapidpaw, hoping that he would finally let him go on the seemingly 'adventure' with him.

"Even if I did, it's not coming to mind." Rapidpaw picked up his pace.

"Wait, hold on— ! Maybe you *do* know! M–my name's Shatterpaw!"

Shatterpaw — wasn't he made an apprentice, like, only half a moon ago? Rapidpaw sighed irritably. "Well, good for you, Shatterpaw. Now, *leave me alone for StarClan's sake.*"

"***Pleeee

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

The rogue scent eventually led beyond the RiverClan border. Now, Rapidpaw glanced behind himself as he and Shatterpaw picked their way over the border, the rogue scent much clearer there than on Clan territory.

The youth's ears flicked. A sudden worry was roiling in his belly. What if he *did* find the rogues, but couldn't track his way back? What then? He would stay a runaway apprentice forever with rogues at his tail!

Focus, Rapidpaw. You have a mission to do. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he marched on, keeping his head and tail high and proud.

Every now and then, he paused to scent the air or to scent the ground. He lost track of the scent every now and then, too, but when he put his nose to the ground and sniffed around for a bit, he caught it once again.

Rapidpaw's paws were starting to ache when the tangy scent vanished. He snapped his nose to the ground and sniffed around, then straightened once again. Nothing.

Burn the stars!

He turned to see that, surprisingly enough, Shatterpaw was still behind him. "Can you smell anything?" He asked his companion, his voice rough from exasperation.

Shatterpaw whirled his gaze back towards the older apprentice, as though surprised that Rapidpaw had finally spoken to him. The smaller blinked, as if he had been a little spaced out, then scented the air. "... I think but it's faint."

Rapidpaw flicked his tail forwards. "Lead the way, then."

Shatterpaw moved ahead of Rapidpaw, nose almost touching the ground. After a few minutes, it got stronger.

Rapidpaw pricked his ears. "Let me lead." He dodged around Shatterpaw, scenting the air to get a clear trail. But that 'clear trail' soon ended at an abrupt stop. Again.

He muttered a curse and started pacing, his tail lashing. *How could I lose it **twice**?* He let out a piqued growl. The scent had disappeared — seemingly popped off the face of the Earth. "Well, *fox dung*!"

Tempted to throw a tantrum, he unsheathed his claws. However, struggling retraining himself, held his ground. *Tantrums won't help.* He closed his eyes and took a few long breaths. Maybe he was just burnt out. *Just catch the scent again and—*

"What's wrong?" Shatterpaw scurried over again, ears pricked and green eyes wide and questioning.

Annoyance gathered in Rapidpaw's belly once again. "I lost the stupid scent." He muttered, before finally letting out a resigned sigh. "Whatever. It's late anyways. Let's get some sleep."

"*Again*?" Shatterpaw enunciated instead of agreeing like he was supposed to. "This is the *second* time in a *row*! Didn't you train to become a warrior?" He raised his brow slightly, looking just as frustrated.

Rapidpaw forced back a flinch. He pinned back his ears, suppressing the urge to peel back his lips to show his fangs. *Little StarClan forsaken—! "You* have *no idea—"* He cut himself off with a sharp breath in, trying to keep his temper in check as much as possible. "... How about *you* track it then, Mr. Smarttail?" The words came out as a snarl, his teeth peeling back to show his fangs as the apprentice gave into the need to display the ivory.

His eyes gleaming with irritation, Shatterpaw's ears twitched arrogantly. "... Well, if you say so."

"Go on, then, I'm waiting." Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes, his tail flicking dangerously from side to side.

"Alright, alright, keep your fur on." Shatterpaw padded a few paces away and began to sniff the air. After a few moments— "Uhh. …"

"Well?" Rapidpaw's voice was venomous as he stalked over to the smaller. "Anything?"

"Ugh, *fine*, let's just go find shelter." Shatterpaw huffed, his shoulders dropping and his ears pinned against his head.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Rapidpaw spat. And with that he marched away, aiming for a few bushes of near. That little place would be his shelter for the night.

Climbing up a tree with plenty of leaves to shelter him, Rapidpaw heard Shatterpaw settle down ungracefully. The branches rattled, but soon the rustles hushed to a stop, and small snores started sounding from above.

In his bush, Rapidpaw sighed. Deeply, from the bottom of his chest. He dropped his head, having no energy to keep up his proud facade any longer.

I'm getting nowhere.

How am I going to find these rogues?

*What if I **never** find them? I'll just forever be known as Rapidpaw, the unlucky runaway medicine cat apprentice!*

He snorted to himself. 'Medicine cat apprentice'. What was StarClan thinking? He was *clearly* meant to be a warrior, not to learn about some dried–up leaves for all eternity!

Mockingstar and Goldleaf are just being unreasonable, including Fringeflight! He curled into a tight ball, his tail drooped grumpily over his nose. *I'll find these rogues, and I'll prove to **everyone** that I **am** worthy.*

*Even **StarClan** won't deny me!*

Chapter IV →

`` ***The Encounter***

A tickling sensation fell over Rapidpaw, and he slowly unlidded his eyes. His whiskers twitched, and star–like sparkles flew from them in swirls.

"What in all the lake … ?" He wrinkled his muzzle in confusion, peering around the vast new space he had suddenly found himself in.

All around the grass was bright, green, and luscious. The sky overhead was crowded with stars from one horizon to the next, completed with a wide, round, silvery moon shining brightly overhead. He started as a voice sounded from somewhere around him, greeting warm and friendly.

"Welcome, Rapidpaw." A starry cat materialized in front of him, eyes blue and warm. "Do you know where you are?"

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. Had he … heard that voice before?

A gentle tone reassuring me in my earliest days.

And suddenly, it dawned on him like lightning striking.

But if I'm right. ... He didn't need to continue the thought. "Am I … ?" His eyes were wide as he gazed at the white, starry feline. "Are … a–are you … ?" He couldn't get the name out.

The StarClan cat chuckled softly, a sound that sent him right back to his kit days. "No, you're not dead, my little one." She blinked at him, slowly, her soft eyes reminding him of a loving queen. She smiled at him, gently. "And I think you know already."

Rapidpaw felt a lump form in his throat as he struggled to stay in control. "... M–mama. …" His voice cracked. He took a step forward, all resolve disintegrating like mist under the sun. He wanted to run to her and pretend like he was a kit all over again.

And he did just that.

"I miss you so much … !" He purred, trembling a bit, breathing in her sweet scent once again.

Flakelight was purring as well, her tail wrapped protectively around her son. "I miss you too, my dearest." She gently rested her muzzle on his head and lapped at his ears lovingly. "My brave little kit."

"I'm keeping my promise." Rapidpaw murmured, tears streaking his muzzle in a dark grey. "I'm trying so hard, Mama."

"I know you are." Flakelight purred, gently running her paws over his cheeks to banish her son's breakdown from showing. "I always knew you would. Ever since you opened your eyes, you had that fire inside you. I just know it."

Rapidpaw buried his muzzle into his mother's fur. "Mama, I have so much to tell you. … I can't believe that you're here, right now, after all these moons—" He looked up at her, suddenly uncertain. "You *are* here … right?"

"Yes, dear." Flakelight purred, nuzzling him gently. "I'm here."

Rapidpaw couldn't stop the bittersweet smile that was all over his muzzle. He was about to say something — tell her everything — but was cut off by another voice from nearby, this one more annoyed than friendly.

"Greetings, Rapidpaw. I see you're having a *sweet* reunion."

Rapidpaw whirled around to see yet another StarClan cat. This one, however, had a strong build, his pelt jet black save for snow–like speckles scattered about, and his eyes like twin sunsets. A particular marking caught Rapidpaw's eye; on his forehead for all to see, there was a diamond–like marking, shining silver and bright.

The boy narrowed his eyes, not recognizing the newcomer. "... Hey. Do I know you?" His tone was cautious as he regarded the larger. He had a feeling that he ought to recognize him, but no name came to mind.

"You *should.*" The tom answered, his voice taking on a rumble of fresh vexation. "Don't apprentices know *anything* these days?"

Rapidpaw felt his neck fur rise. He opened his jaws, about to give a nasty and humbling retort, when the other tom cut him off. Again.

"Silence. I'm not done." Rapidpaw had a feeling that the other tom would have growled at him if he weren't a StarClan cat. "If you don't know, I'm Fallenstar, leader before Mockingstar." Fallenstar took a step forward. "And also your father."

"'Father'?" And Rapidpaw's eyes turned round like two blue moons, his earlier annoyance driven back at the sudden revelation. He was speechless as he gazed at Fallenstar, his jaws open and closing as he struggled to find any words. *I am the son of a ... **leader**? And one so newly succeeded?*

Fallenstar's eyes narrowed a bit, clearly irritated despite it. "Yes, your father. Now, let me finish." He paused, as if gathering his words. "Do you know why we're visiting you? Speak."

Rapidpaw's ears twitched, caught off guard. "Uh … because you want to?"

"Wrong." Fallenstar retorted.

Rapidpaw flinched a bit at the force in his father's voice, but he continued listening anyway.

Fallenstar didn't seem to notice the light movement, and if he had, he paid no attention. "We came into your dreams to warn you, Rapidpaw. To give you a message. Take heed." Fallenstar flicked a white tail tip to Rapidpaw, then bounded off.

I guess that meant 'follow'. Rapidpaw forced himself to untangle from Flakelight. His heart protested, clenching up as though about to shatter. He didn't want to leave her, not for a million moons. … But his father was waiting.

"Go with him." Flakelight lapped his ears one last time, her blue eyes shining with nothing but love. "I'll always be with you, Rapidpaw." She gently pawed at his chest where his heart would be. "Right here, my dear. Right here."

"I'll never forget you." Rapidpaw nuzzled his mother, his voice breaking as he lapped at her cheek. "I will fulfill my promise in your name, Mama."

"Rapidpaw! How long does it take?!" Fallenstar's irritated voice cut through his ears.

"Coming!" Rapidpaw called back. He never took his eyes off his mother's. A beat, then— "I love you." And with that, he dashed after his father. It took all his willpower not to look back and wail in loss.

"We're here." Fallenstar paused and gracefully whisked around, facing his son once again. His orange eyes burned into Rapidpaw's, as though the other wanted to sear the younger's soul. "Tell me, Rapidpaw. Do you think it's worth it?"

"'Worth it'?" Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side, still trying to catch his breath from running. "… What do you mean?"

"I *mean* is it worth *defying StarClan* for your *own needs*?" Fallenstar retorted impatiently.

"'*Defying StarClan*'??" Rapidpaw felt his fur bush up again, fury feeling as though it would boil his blood. "I'm not *defying* anybody, thanks very much! Didn't you hear *anything* me and Flakelight said to each other, or are you *deaf*??"

Fallenstar's ears twitched as if he were suppressing the urge to pin them back against his head. "Watch your words, youngster."

"Why should I?" Rapidpaw retorted. "What has StarClan done so far? You all only want to force me to become a *medicine cat* after completing my lake–forsaken assessments! For stars' sakes!"

"Rapidpaw." Fallenstar let out a soft, dangerous growl. "You not only disrespected the medicine cats, but also StarClan with your … choice of words."

"You asked me," Rapidpaw wrinkled his muzzle, "if it was worth *defying* StarClan for 'my own needs'!" He took a step forward. "You tell me that keeping my promise to Flakelight using every scrap of strength I have is *selfish*?? You tell me that keeping my mother's memory alive is *selfish*?! She is your *wife* and I am your *son*, don't forget!"

"I'm not here to start an argument." Fallenstar hissed slowly. "I'm only here to give you a warning: StarClan is watching. Even if you *do* become a warrior, we will not stand."

"I'd like to see you *try*!" Rapidpaw practically yowled with rage. No, he did yowl with rage. "You'll see me, Fallenstar, and you will *not* deny me! *I* ***will*** *become a warrior*!!"

"We've warned you." Fallenstar growl echoed, and the dream returned to black.

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

Rapidpaw's whiskers twitched, subtly. He was starting to wake up when, suddenly —

"What in the— ?!" The apprentice jolted awake, caught off guard. Blinking a few times, trying to get the sleep out of his eyes, he glanced down to find a freshly–served minnow that had probably slid off his head.

"Wakey, wakey, sleepy–paws, it's sunhigh." Shatterpaw was sitting beside him, lapping his tongue over his paws with a mischievous glint in his green eyes.

"*Sunhigh??*" Rapidpaw jumped to his paws, forgetting his shock from the sudden fish. Gathering himself again, he nodded briskly in thanks and took the aquatic prey in his jaws. "Go ahead and start trying to find the scent again. I'll join you in a second."

A few sunrises had passed since Rapidpaw last saw the vision of StarClan — and since they had lost the rogue scent. Consequently, it seemed like forever since the RiverClan apprentice had truly felt at home. Every now and then, he wondered how his Clanmates were doing. Did they miss him, or did they resent him for running off? A Gathering had already passed. Did Mockingstar announce his disappearance? What about Silverbrook and Fringeflight?

Rapidpaw shook his head, as though trying to shake the thoughts out. *No time to think about that right now.* He had a promise to fulfill. Once he was done doing that, he would see his Clanmates again, and all assumptions would dissipate forever.

I hope.

Shatterpaw, his companion, shrugged. "Yeah, su—" Before he could finish, though, there was a soft cracking noise to their left.

In an instant, Rapidpaw snapped his nose to the air. Fresh rouge scent washed over his senses. Excitement pricked his paws, making him forget all about his initial hunger.

Finally!

"Guard that." He muttered briskly, dropping his fish. "I'll eat later." And with that, he stalked off towards the sound of crunching branches.

"Yay, alone again!" Shatterpaw's sarcastic voice came from behind him as the apprentice shuffled around, hiding the fish with sticks or whatnot.

Rapidpaw ignored him, though. He had a priority right now, and Shatterpaw could wait. *And if he **doesn't** want to wait, then he can track his way back to RiverClan!* And so, staying alert and awake despite himself and relying on his senses, the youth stalked forward.

One. Deliberate. Step. At a time.

His ears were pricked, his muscles balled and tense, his jaws parted to carry any foreign scent into his lungs.

Every sudden noise practically sent him jumping.

Every sudden sight made him whip around with a snarl.

One.

Deliberate.

Step.

At a time.

"I can help ya with that, y'know."

Rapidpaw jumped a mile and whipped around, fur spiking like a hedgehog with a very undignified squeak. *Very* un–warrior–like. "Whu— *huh?*! Help me?" A deep deep breath whistled in through his lips.

Focus.

"With what?" Calm, steady voice with perfect emotional suppression.

Then, she fully came into view.

And his resolve was gone as quick as it had come.

She had a slender frame with lush, ginger and black fur and white paws, tail tip and chest. Her eyes were a captivating blue, like a clear sky at sunhigh. A little of that rogue scent was

on her, but Rapidpaw could barely detect anything other than that pleasant scent of … vanilla?

A friendly smile was up the she-cat's muzzle, making her look even more dashing. "With your li'l … *quest.*"

"Uhhh. …" Rapidpaw forced himself to concentrate. "Uhm. What quest? I'm just — what do you call it — taking a walk? … Yeah, sounds about right." His eyes never left hers, however.

The she–cat rolled her eyes. "Don't play dumb with me. I can tell that you're followin' a scent trail."

"Following a scent trail … yeah." Rapidpaw gave an annoyed twitch of his ears. *Skies above, Rapidpaw, focus!* "I mean— um. How could you help? I mean— like— uh—"

"C'mon." She sighed, wrapping her slender tail gently over his shoulders and guiding him to the scent trail once more.

At her touch, he froze.

*Come **on**, get yourself together!*

What was *wrong* with him? Why did his brain suddenly stop working? And what was that feeling in his stomach, like butterflies had somehow settled in?

"I'm Charm, by the way." The she–cat continued, her beautiful smile never wavering and not at all helping his situation.

Fits you. Rapidpaw was about to say, but held his tongue just in time. "Charm. Hi. Uh. Nice to meet you. … Um. I'm Rapidpaw."

"'Rapidpaw'. An unusual name, I'll say that." Charm commented mildly.

"Yeah. Um. … I guess." Was all Rapidpaw could muster at the moment.

Then, Charm *giggled*. It was a small, delicate sound that made Rapidpaw's heart skip a beat or two. *Please, don't let me be flushing.* He had a bad feeling about those hopes, however.

"You're amusin', Rapidpaw." Charm's ears pricked and her eyes brightened. "Oh, look at that. We're back to our scent trail."

"We are … ?" *Already?* Rapidpaw hadn't even noticed the harsh rogue scent over Charm's sweeter one.

"Yeah." Charm untwined herself from him and scented the ground. She blinked, her blue eyes flashing with surprise. Half to herself, she murmured, "Oh, wow. Well, that's an … interestin' scent."

As Rapidpaw watched in a seemingly frozen state, she lifted her muzzle to scent the air. Then, her eyes landed on Shatterpaw, who was watching the whole scene as he sat beside the abandoned minnow. "Who's that little fella over there?"

"Huh?" Rapidpaw snapped back to attention at what Charm was actually saying instead of how strangely soothing her voice was. He followed her gaze, then he flicked his tail. "Oh, yes! Um— that's Shatterpaw. He's my, erm … companion."

"Oh." Charm's eyes narrowed a bit in interest. "Another 'paw'. Are ya two related, or somethin'?"

"Uh, *no*." Rapidpaw felt that came out too sassy for his liking, but he went along with it, anyway. "He just … tagged along, I guess."

"Did he, now?" Charm's voice sounded quite intrigued.

"Yeah, if you would count 'begging me to let him come like there was no tomorrow' tagging along." Rapidpaw answered. Annoyance at the memory helped him concentrate on something other than how beautiful Charm was. …

*Rapidpaw, snap out of it! What **is** wrong with me?*

"That's … very enthrallin'." Charm continued slowly, seemingly not noticing Rapidpaw's inner struggles. She leaned in, her muzzle close to Rapidpaw's ear as she lowered her voice to a whisper. "That's the one."

"Huh?!" Rapidpaw snapped back to attention. Again. He lowered his voice as well. "'The one'— ? Like, erm, the one we're tracking? … But his scent—"

"Don't ya smell it?" Charm interrupted, her voice soft but urgent, her breath tickling his ear. "That rogue scent's all over 'em!"

"It is … ?" Rapidpaw stared from Shatterpaw to Charm, back and forth. "He's a Clanmate, though."

"Ya said that he begged ya to let him come, yeah?" Charm flicked her tail, her blue eyes compellingly grave. "It all aligns, Rapidpaw. Surely ya can see it?"

Rapidpaw tried to focus. Charm was so close to him that his neurons were firing uncontrollably.

What is this feeling?

Meanwhile, Charm was speaking sense but—

Shatterpaw's ears pinned back slightly, a gesture of annoyance. "I'm right here, you know."

Snapping back into reality – *Again!* – Rapidpaw suddenly noticed Shatterpaw's existence once again. "Oh, yes. Uh, let's get back to tracking, shall we?"

Charm flicked her ears. “Sure, whate’er ya say. Just think ‘bout it, ‘kay?” Was that annoyance glinting in her eyes now?

“Uh, okay.”

And that’s when Shatterpaw got a suspicious glint in his green gaze. Soon, though, he rolled his eyes and huffed softly, seemingly going along with it.

Rapidpaw led the way again, Charm always at his side. The rogue scent was stronger now. Every now and then, Charm slid in front to lead the way, but only if the scent started to fade away. It was inconsistent, of which was odd.

This whole *experience* was weird for Rapidpaw, to say the least. It felt strangely *comforting* to walk beside Charm, even though he had just met her. He found himself distracted most of the time now, his mind wandering off to who knows where.

Soon, though, Charm halted, turning around to face them after leading through a small woods for a while.

“Are any o’ ya two hungry? Woods’re full o’ prey, and I thought that we’d hunt a little.” She tipped her head to the side, mainly looking at Rapidpaw.

“Sure, I guess.” Despite him skipping breakfast, he had been way too preoccupied to remember about his stomach’s needs. “Is there a river here by any chance?” He wanted to fish. Very badly. He missed the river’s currents, despite it all. …

Shatterpaw looked in a different direction, however, seemingly stalling. "I hear a stream … it should be one over there."

"You do?" Rapidpaw pricked his ears. After a second, finally, he heard the soft rush of water.

Charm was still looking at him with those blue eyes of hers, making his heart beat faster than normal.

*I **have** to stop getting butterflies from her looking at me. ...*

"Okay, I hear it now. Charm, wanna uh … fish with us, er … or are you good with hunting … land prey … ?" He blinked at her, surprising himself with his own hopefulness.

Charm shook her head, though, her blue eyes holding an amused glint to them. "I'm not a river cat, Rapidpaw. I'd best hunt on land."

"Oh. … Okay, then. … Uhm. Meet you here?" Rapidpaw knew that he was stalling, and all too well. But, at the same time … he wanted to make sure that she would stick with the idea of helping him track down the rogue scent.

"Meet ya here." Charm's small, amused smile came up once again. And with that, the graceful she–cat bounded off into the trees, her fur glinting one last time in the sun.

It took a moment for Rapidpaw to recover himself and begin searching for the stream. A

hot moment, that is. Soon, however, he snapped out of his dazed state and led the way, grounding himself to concentrate on pinpointing the gurgling of rushing water. Soon, Rapidpaw had crouched beside it, deciding whether to dive in or not. *Dive in sounds relaxing. ... I wonder how Charm is doing.*

As though he had said it out loud — and he panicked for a second at the thought that he had — Shatterpaw's teasing voice floated in from beside him. "So, I noticed you have some … *interest* … in the she–cat."

"'Interest'?" Caught off guard, Rapidpaw's gaze snapped from the water and to his Clanmate. *Is **that** what this feeling is?* Quickly deciding to play innocent, he blinked and shrugged, "What do you mean? How have I shown that? Of course, if I *do* have an 'interest' in her, as you say."

Snickering, Shatterpaw wasn't so swayed by Rapidpaw's 'explanation'. "You're all stuttery and nervous around her. I can hear your heart beat faster than a woodpecker's beak! Don't tell me that you're always like that around she–cats!"

Rapidpaw stared at Shatterpaw, his blue eyes widening slightly. *I mean, he **does** have a point. ... But is it **that** obvious?*

He was mostly baffled, though. *Is **that** what's wrong with me?*

Charm *was* pretty and all, but. …

"Do I have a … *crush* on her?" He muttered, thinking aloud at this point.

*But Imma **RiverClan** cat! Charm's an **outsider**! How… ?*

"No. …" He dragged his gaze away from his companion. "No, no, that's against the warrior code! Loyal warriors don't fall for outsiders. …"

Am I disloyal? Is that all? Disloyalty?

He shook out his head. "No, I can't be disloyal. …" He frowned, padding to the riverbank and dipped his paws in. "I gotta think." And, with that, he disappeared into the currents.

The stream never failed to calm him, its cool waters ruffling his pelt and soothing his paws. Like feathers or cotton, they brushed across his body and relaxed his eyes.

It felt good and to feel the currents swirl around him once again. Natural, it felt, like it was a second heartbeat of his.

Soon, he resurfaced and swam in a leisure pedal, but his eyes were distant still.

I'm here because of my loyalty, though. How could I be disloyal?

Am I really falling for an outsider… ?

I'm loyal! I'm a full–blooded RiverClan cat!

*... **Am** I loyal ... ?*

... Was Fallenstar right? Am I ... just being selfish?

Am I being disloyal?!

He furrowed his brow and pursed his lips. His paws hit rock as the current gently guided him to a stepping stone lodged in the bank in the stream. Unsheathing his claws, he sprang his way onto it. There was a ray of sunshine conveniently shining on the warming stone, and he dipped his tail into the cooler currents.

"I'm *not* disloyal!" Rapidpaw decreed loudly. "I never *was* disloyal, and I will never *be* disloyal!" The current pulls at his tail — a gentle tug of doubt. It started lashing a bit, flicking diamond–like droplets onto the bank.

Resolve settled in his belly once again, and he closed his eyes before putting his head onto his paws, trying to drive out his doubt.

I'm not disloyal. ... A cat's heart falls where it wants — border or not. That doesn't mean I'm not loyal.

He felt his mind slowly drift off, exhaustion finally catching up to him. A small nap would be fine. No, it would be more than fine. One thought broke through the mush, though, clear as day—

*If I'm really loyal, why does all this feel so ... so strangely **right**?*

Chapter V →

`` ***Darkness Within***

Rapidpaw felt his pelt prickle along his spine. His paws and belly felt sticky and moist with … something, and he opened his eyes.

Immediately, his pupils dilated, trying to get used to the darkness that he had awoken to. *Have I slept 'till nightfall?* When he pushed himself to his paws, though, he unexpectedly felt his pads slip and he grunted, unsheathing his claws to steady himself.

Hold on. …

He panned around, his blue eyes narrowed against the black.

I'm not on a stepping stone anymore.

"Rapidpaw!"

He whipped around, nearly falling on the slippery ground, as his name was hissed into his ear.

There was nothing.

No one.

Branches cracked and dry leaves rustled.

There wasn't a breath of wind anywhere.

Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. "Hello?" He called out tentatively, his voice echoing eerily.

"Rapidpaw!"

He whipped around in the other direction, hissing. Rapidpaw already didn't like the feeling of this place, and this voice was not helping. Irritation suddenly sparked inside him. "I hear you!" He snapped. "Show yourself already!"

Instead, dead leaves rustled behind him once again. He whirled that way, teeth bared, but saw no one.

Not a single breath of life.

What's going on? Rapidpaw's frustration grew. Somehow, he felt even more impatient than before.

"You're angry." The cat hissed in his ear.

Rapidpaw lashed out, daggers unsheathed, but only split the stale air. "I'm sure about to be!"

The cat chuckled, a dark sound that seemed to bounce around his ears. "Cute." Red eyes blazed in Rapidpaw's peripheral vision, and finally, the cat fully emerged from the shadows. His crimson gaze was glowing against the dullness of his white pelt. A ragged scar slashed across the visitor's face — down from his torn ear to curl around his throat. A smirk was curled across his edged, black muzzle, black paws nearly invisible in the ever–dead light. "*Real* cute. Y'know, I like you already."

Rapidpaw looked him up and down. "And who in all the stars are *you*?"

"Fury." He flicked an ear. "Strange that you've ne'er heard o' me before. I was second–in–command o' the Colony of which ya track now."

"'Colony'?" Rapidpaw's irritation heightened. *Why is this cat being so vague?*

"Yeah, Colony." Fury began to slowly circle him. "Our leader was Sunrise. Though his full name's Sunrise Reaper, he's only called that when an opposer faced him. Why?" He paused.

Rapidpaw flicked his ears, his ice–blue gaze never leaving Fury's red one. "Go on."

"He's called Sunrise Reaper …" Fury paused in his pacing, "'cause he ne'er lost. He reaped *all* the sunrises that his enemies would e'er see." He took a small step forward. "I learned from his mate, and he only taught his son." He tried to flick his black–tipped tail over Rapidpaw's ears, but the apprentice avoided the gesture. Fury shrugged and went on. "Do ya know the story behind *my* name, dear apprentice?"

"No." Rapidpaw, his irritation momentarily subdued by confusion, let out a snort. "What's your deal, anyway? What are you trying to prove?"

"What *is* there to prove?" Fury never blinked as he stared him down. "I'm just merely tellin' ya somethin'."

"And what is that?" Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes.

Fury's claws unsheathed a bit, his ruby red eyes never leaving Rapidpaw's blue ones. "Do ya think you're talented, Rapidpaw?"

"How do you know my name?" Rapidpaw's fur spiked, indignation and frustration mixing with alarm.

"Do you?" Once again, instead of answering, Fury tipped his head to the side. "Are ya talented, Rapidpaw?"

Rapidpaw shifted his paws. "Well, yeah, I think I am."

"Do ya think ya have room to get even better?"

"I guess." Rapidpaw flicked his ears. "I mean, everyone has room to get better." *One way or another.*

Finally, Fury blinked. Satisfaction seemed to wash over his features like a gentle wave.

"Good." He slowed his pace. "Good." Then, he sat up and resumed his pacing. "Ya know, I can help ya with yer situation."

"What situation?" Rapidpaw asked tightly, his blue eyes cold as he gazed at Fury.

"Y'know what I mean." Fury lightly replied, side–eyeing him as he passed.

Rapidpaw knew that Fury was most likely talking about his situation with his warrior ceremony, but how could this random cat know anything about him? He lifted his chin. "How do I? I can't read your mind."

Fury let out another low chuckle. "You're so … *persistent*, Rapidpaw. I am fond of that in a cat." When silence followed, he shrugged again. "Fine, if ya don't wanna say it y'self." Fury suddenly thrust his muzzle close. "Ya failed. Ya failed yer warrior ceremony. Ya failed yer *mother*."

Rapidpaw arched his back and growled. "You don't know anything!"

"Oh, but I do." Fury seemed to purr at Rapidpaw's anger. "Even if I didn't, why're ya so defensive?"

Rapidpaw swallowed the rest of his growl, and he stiffened, trying hard to collect himself once again. "I'm … it's not *that* … I'm just. …" *Confused? Angry?* What was the right word? "I just. …"

And nothing came to him.

For the first time, he was out of words.

Suddenly, the fire died in his eyes, and a heavy weight settled in his belly. It knocked out his rage with the force of an avalanche, and his breath got stuck in his throat. Fury's words stung his heart like nettles. *'Ya failed your warrior ceremony. Ya failed yer* ***mother****.'*

Nothing came to him …

Because it's true. I just. ...

"Failed." The word came out small, like a tragic breath waiting to break. His shoulders slumped.

"And ya will keep on failin'," Fury continued smoothly, "without any help — without *my* help. Think about it: a *whole force*'s against ya, Rapidpaw. *StarClan* made *ya* ***fail***!"

"Fail. …" Suddenly, guilt and blame came rushing up to him. "They made me fail."

And his rage came rushing back. The building anger at his warrior ancestors suddenly started to feel unbearable. A small growl escaped his throat. "*StarClan made me* ***fail***."

"That's right." Fury encouraged. "They *made* ya *fail*! And I can help ya prove 'em wrong. … Wrong to e'er even *think* about gettin' their *filthy* paws onto yer destiny."

"You can?" Rapidpaw's anger didn't die — it only grew stronger. The forest seemed to be getting even darker, but he paid no mind. "How?"

"I can help ya grow stronger." Fury coaxed. "I can train ya. … Then, *no one* will deny ya. Not e'er again."

*'**No one** will deny you. Not e'er again.'* Fury's words echoed through his mind, reverberating through his thoughts like a toxic mantra.

Over and over, over and over. …

The thought was intoxicatingly bright.

"So?" Fury extended a paw invitingly. "Will ya accept my invitation?"

Rapidpaw felt dazed. Hesitation finally peeked through the fog of his mind — only a small wisp of it — but it was all too small for him to pay any mind.

And so, slowly lifting a front paw, he clasped Fury's in his own and shook on it. "I accept."

"Good." Fury's small fangs shone in a smile of delight. "*Real* good." He backed away. "Then, let's begin, shall we?"

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

Sounds came back slowly. Rapidpaw groaned, shielding his eyes with one paw as sunshine beamed down mercilessly through leaves above.

I don't wanna get up. ... His muscles were sore as though he had trained in life instead of a mere dream—

"Rapidpaw? Are ya awake? Rapidpaw?" A soft voice came from above him, and he slowly opened his eyes.

It was Charm. The she blinked, her irises clouded with an anxiety of some sort.

Such a stunning she–cat. ... "Ungh. … Nah, I'm not awake." Rapidpaw rolled over and buried his muzzle into his paws.

"Hey. Hey, nah, get up." Charm's voice, though soft and gentle, was stern. She nudged him. "Ya were asleep all afternoon yesterd'y, and didn't even twitch when we tried to wake ya at dawn. I don't wanna risk ya fallin' asleep like that again."

Rapidpaw peeked at her through the side of his vision. "But what if I wanna sleep still?" He complained.

"Ya wanna sleep," Charm's voice hardened to a more commanding tone, "most likely 'cause ya haven't eaten. Look, Shatterpaw even brought a fresh tetra for ya."

"Yeah!" Shatterpaw nudged the trout invitingly closer to Rapidpaw's jaws. "Here, eat it. You're the only one left without breakfast! Or food, for that matter."

When Rapidpaw just twitched his ears and let out a low grumble, Charm nudged him again. "C'mon, Rapidpaw. If ya sleep more, it might be bad for ya." She coaxed, almost pleadingly.

"If I *don't* sleep more, it might be bad for me, yeah." Rapidpaw muttered stubbornly.

Charm's eyes sharpened. "Rapidpaw."

"Mmmm, fine, fine!" At the first bite, however, his mouth and mind and body sang with rejoice as the succulent juices bathed his tongue. He was done in a flash, licking his lips with satisfaction. And finally, he felt a small spark of energy begin to ignite his senses and chase away his sleep. Stretching, he slowly half hopped, half slid off the stepping stone and back onto the grass.

And that was when the piercing sensation overtook his back leg. It was a sudden thing, and concentrated so that it would feel like infinite claws digging into his bones. He hissed in a sharp breath, successfully silencing the yelp of pain that lunged at his vocals. "Okay. … So, now that we're all up. …"

"We should continue." Charm finished for him from beside. Her brow was still furrowed with worry. "Right?"

"Yeah." Rapidpaw nodded tightly. "... Let's go."

And the eldest of the three pushed forward once again. At the head of the group, as always, his nose was in the air in an effort of fooling awareness. Awareness, indeed, when his eyes were consistently insisting on lidding themselves.

Charm was still looking at him, though, her gaze thoughtful and maybe a little judgmental. She narrowed her eyes. “You’re limpin’.”

“Am I?” Rapidpaw blearily looked around himself, not quite sure what he was even looking for. Clearly, despite his best efforts to not show or admit it, exhaustion was already taking a toll on him.

He narrowed his eyes as well, if only to himself. Flexing his claws a bit, he realized that there was an even sharper pain when he did so. *Oh, great lakes, why?*

Charm sniffed around his hind leg. “Sit down.” She ordered.

Rapidpaw blinked, furrowing his brow at her. “Why?”

“‘Cause I said so.” Charm guided him to a sitting position, slowly. “There. Now, where do ya hurt, and how bad’s it?”

“Charm, it’s nothin’.” Rapidpaw sighed. “I probably just slept on it awkwardly.”

"Quit arguin'." Charm snapped. But her eyes were thoughtful as she looked at Rapidpaw. "Now, answer my questions. I needa know if it needs healin'. If it does n' ya don't allow me to tend to it, then ya might be limpin' forever."

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. *She ... knows how to heal?*

A heartbeat passed. Then, probably to Charm's great relief, he relented. "Fine. It hurts around my ankle. … The pain is there, but it's not *that* bad. It hurts more when I unsheathe my claws."

"A'ight. … Does it hurt when you're sittin'?"

"... Kinda."

Charm nodded slowly, seeming to take mental notes. "M'kay. Lay down now."

Rapidpaw obeyed, too tired to really do anything else.

"Does it hurt now?" Charm interrogated, her tone gentler now.

Rapidpaw shook his head.

"Okay." Charm felt around his ankle. "It's swollen." She rubbed her paws onto it.

Rapidpaw visibly flinched, but said nothing.

A few moments passed like that. Then, finally, with a sigh, Charm stood up again. “It’s sprained a’ight. I’m gonna put on a splint ‘cause I ain’t sure if it’s fractured after all.”

“Fractured?” *Is it that bad?* Rapidpaw furrowed his brow. Then, alarm finally jolted him into full–wakefulness. “Wait, *fractured*?! Will it … heal?” *What if it doesn’t? How will I be a warrior with a limp?? It* ***has*** *to heal!*

He twitched his ears, irritated. *Fury’s training made me trip over a gods forsaken branch. ... I swear if it doesn’t heal because of this I will —*

“It should.” Charm called from the spot in the woods where she was sniffing around for stiff sticks, snapping him back to the present. “If ya let me fix it, that is.” She trotted over once again, a couple of sticks and leaves in her jaws. She dropped them onto the ground at his hindquarters. “M‘kay, so just relax for me, and I’ll splint ya ankle. …”

Charm worked quickly and efficiently. Rapidpaw watched with amazement as the outsider gently put a soothing concoction onto his injury before placing the sticks firmly on either side. Finally, she wrapped the tough grass to keep the splint in place before wrapping the rest around his hindquarters to suspend his injured ligament upward.

“There.” She sighed, her demeanor more at ease than it had been all that morning. “So that ya don’t injure it further.”

“Wow. …” Rapidpaw flexed his claws again testingly. There was only a twinge of pain, but nothing more. “It feels so much better already!” He looked up at her, eyes wide with admiration. “How … where … ?” He was lost for words.

“... Did I learn to heal?” Charm finished for him. She smiled, amusement dancing in her blue irises. “I taught myself.” She nudged him gently with her muzzle again. “Can ya stand?”

“I … I think.” Rapidpaw tried to heave himself to his paws. He wobbled, unsteady, his injured back leg restrained despite the urge to set it on the ground. He stumbled, and his shoulder landed on another. He looked to see Charm at his side once again.

“Steady, steady.” The she–cat murmured. “Let me help ya.”

Rapidpaw’s belly fluttered, and he felt a smile tug at the corner of his lips. “Thank you, Charm.” He purred. “Thank you. You’re … you’re amazing at this.”

“It doesn’t take talent.” Charm let out a small purr back. “Just simple dedication.”

The two set off again to continue tracking. Rapidpaw glanced behind himself to check on his companion, making sure that the young apprentice hadn't somehow fallen behind.

Shatterpaw was far from behind, though, eyes flicking back and forth between Rapidpaw and Charm. A smirk of delight and mischief was all over his muzzle, and he winked teasingly at Rapidpaw.

Rapidpaw huffed out a breath. He made a quick face back, nose wrinkled and tongue sticking out in the most kit–like charm he had presented in moons.

Turning to look forward once again, his gaze soon traveled back to Charm, though, and she looked back. He saw it, that spark that he felt in his heart when his eyes connected with hers.

Bluer than the sky itself ... Rapidpaw smiled at her, then tore his gaze away from hers once again, finding it strangely *hard* to do so.

I ... I'm still falling for her. He realized, though not for the first time.

And that was when dread invaded the gold his mind, a sudden flood of black unexplainable. *This is so wrong! So, so, so wrong! But ... how can something so wrong feel so ... right?* Then, he shoved those thoughts away. *No, Rapidpaw, no. You're imagining it.*

Charm purred softly; it felt so great to hear that sound. Rapidpaw felt a purr of his own making its way out.

From the moment that he had first seen her, Charm had set a set spark aflame inside him. It was so different from the fire that he felt with his promise — it was so much more … strange. Rapidpaw had never felt anything like it before. Every time she purred, he felt less nervous around her; every time she smiled, he felt a smile of his own make its way up — it was almost unreal.

Quit thinking! Rapidpaw tried to snap his mind back to the task at hand: tracking the rogue scent. *You know that you won't be able to be with her anyways, so quit thinking. ... Just don't think.*

But as Charm's gentle support guided him, the dread mixed with the butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

*Oh, but burn the stars, how will I **not** think?*

Chapter VI →

`` ***Shadows in the Skies***

"Quicker! Ya have to be *quicker*!" Fury paced around, yowling out orders as he forced Rapidpaw to rehearse the frontal twist for the tenth time.

Rapidpaw landed on his paws, his movements fluid and making no sound. *I did that* ***perfectly!*** He let out a low grumble of frustration. "I'm *literally* quicker than *you*!"

"You're not even *half* my speed!" Fury spat back, his little white fangs bared in frustration.

"I'm *past* yer speed! Besides," Rapidpaw snarled, taking a challenging step forward, "you ain't even teachin' me anything! All ya make me do is fight ya!"

"Isn't figurin' it out the best way to learn?" Fury hissed, taking a step forward as well. "How many times do I have to explain dis t' ya? You'll learn better if ya learn it the hard way!"

Rapidpaw woke to the same dream. Over and over again.

Several sunsets had passed since Rapidpaw's first encounter with Fury. Every night now, he and Fury sparred — and the scarred tom didn't seem to want to teach him any moves anytime soon. "Ya will learn better if ya learn it the hard way." Fury had told him matter–of–factly. Every night Rapidpaw objected, Fury would repeat that wretched phrase as though it were holy.

Over and over again.

*I'm **not** dealing with a useless mentor!* Rapidpaw let out a low growl. "Why? Every cat learns differently!"

"Don't forget yer place as my *student*." Fury spat, fur puffed up in annoyance.

"Student? How can I be a student if my teacher isn't even *teaching*?" Rapidpaw shot back.

"Maybe yer just not *learnin'*!" Fury snapped. And suddenly, his eyes sparked with something else — an idea no doubt. "Unless ya think yer ready to graduate — for yer *true* assessment?"

"Bring it on." Rapidpaw spat. "Let's see what you can do!"

There was a nudging sensation — like a warning that he should heed. He paid no mind. Anger burned too fiercely.

Fury let out a snarl — but there wasn't just anger in the sound. Glee? Excitement? "You'll regret this, *apprentice*."

And he charged.

Quickly remembering his training, Rapidpaw stole to the side last second. He whipped around and kicked out, but—

But *nothing*. Only stale air responded.

Rapidpaw spun around to scan the forest, his ice–blue eyes glowing brighter than the bioluminescent mushrooms around him — whether from the darkness or vexation inside. "Coward!"

The nudging sensation came back, this time more insistent. Rapidpaw, momentarily distracted, shook out his fur and scented the air.

Above the stench of rotten ground, there was a faint smell of vanilla and dawning air. He took in a sharp breath. "Charm." Was she with him, right here? Or was her scent merely somehow in his dream?

I need to wake up.

But what if she *was* in his dream? What if she was lost in this horrible forest? *I have to wake her, too.* Fury had vanished, and his explosive mentor might not take her sudden presence kindly. *Or is she training to be a better warrior, too?* She was an outsider, though! Why would she … ?

Does she … want to come back to RiverClan … with … with me?

A few sunrises ago, which was a few sunrises after he had first met Charm, he had come to terms with the love that softened his senses when he saw her. He had realized that there was no denying his fondness for her, so he had told her everything:

About the Clans. About RiverClan. About StarClan. About his dreams.

About his warrior ceremony.

About his promise.

She had listened to every word he had said, her attentive blue eyes glinting against the sun.

"A–and if ya ever need some place to … to stay …" Rapidpaw had continued, suddenly nervous about what he was about to suggest, "we live by a lake … I mean … you *could* stop by." He had blinked at her blue eyes with his own. Did he dare to hope?

Charm had smiled, her blue eyes twinkling with amusement and something else entirely. Teasingly, gently, the molly had booped her muzzle against his. "Hmm … I'll think 'bout it."

Now, Rapidpaw looked about the eternal night of the forest, his gaze tentatively hopeful. He scented the air once more, tempted to track it. *Had she finally decided … ? Had she … ?* Rapidpaw wanted to jump until he touched the sky at the thought.

The nudging sensation came back, and her voice, distant but insistent, came through his dream. "*Rapidpaw … wake … Rapidpaw. …*"

Wake. Charm wanted him to wake up? But wasn't she in his dream as well? Well … *I should try anyways.*

And the prodigy closed his eyes. Memories of tactics to jump out of dreams came rushing back.

He took a deep, long breath.

Slowly, he let it out.

He felt his heartbeat slow.

He did it again, slower this time.

Wake up. He willed himself. *Wake up, Rapidpaw.*

But a low growl metaphorically slapped him out of his meditative state. Charm's soothing vocals ceased. The nudging sensation vanished like mist under a blazing sun. Rapidpaw, startled and finally remembering his current situation, let out a growl of his own — just as aggressively if not more.

"Looks like ya won't be able to save yer li'l girl." Fury's red eyes glowed mockingly from the darkness. "Pity, ain't it?"

Rapidpaw snarled. "You *coward*! You ran away, and now you won't let me out!"

"Nah." Fury flicked a tail mildly. "I was merely buyin' time … 'cause the punishment that awaits outside is gonna be *so much better* to watch if ya make it there juuust a *li'l* later tonight."

"*What??*" Rapidpaw suddenly felt his heartbeat quicken. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?! *Let me out of this dream*!"

"Ohh, Rapidpaw, Rapidpaw." Fury cooed, tipping his head to the side in a gesture of false empathy. "So naive. It's almost heartwarmin'. But don't ya worry, it's almost time."

Rapidpaw snarled and instinctively crouched into a position dedicated to offence. "Lemme *out* or I'll *make ya*!"

"*Make* me?" Fury's eyes widened sarcastically. "Ya can't *make* me do anythin', li'l Clan cat."

"You wanna test that?" Rapidpaw growled, fur spiking in a sheer, burning rage.

Fury, however, kept his fur smooth. His red eyes were *sparkling*. "Nah, Rapidpaw, the question *should* be if *ya* wanna test that." With that, the scarred tom launched himself at him. But then —

He *vanished*.

"*F*<k!*" Rapidpaw spat in frustration and turned in a circle. *Tricky little son of a—*

A sudden pain speared through his face.

Sharp.

Agonizing.

Horrible pain.

He let out a cry that would barely be recognized as his, the shock sending him stumbling. He lashed out blindly, desperate to shield himself from *everything* — but only stale air responded to his cries.

He heard a snarl climb its way out of his throat, a tortured rather than threatening sound. Warm liquid flowed from where the pain was finest. Red colored the monochrome ground below — the only trail of life that forest would ever have.

Dimly, he became aware that his right eye had closed tight shut. Slowly, he forced it open once again. He could only hope that soft whimper was merely in his head.

Red replaced black in half of his vision, and a defensive hiss ripped from his tongue. "Burn the stars!" *He lashed my eye!*

"Fury, I *swear*!" There was an uncontrollable tremble in Rapidpaw's voice now — he hated it. *"If you don't c–come out and* ***fight*** *like a d@*n tom, I'll—"*

And he was back into the waking world.

Shatterpaw was nudging Rapidpaw awake, calling out his name in a frenzy. *Not Charm.* A dejected sigh almost escaped him.

“Rapidpaw, Rapidpaw! Charm has caught a— ... scent. … ” The tom before him paused — something barely registered by the older as Shatterpaw’s voice slowed and trailed. A sudden thing, it was, as his eyes widened in a sheer horror that Rapidpaw had never seen. “Your eye!”

“Eh— ? What about it?” Rapidpaw hoped that horrible pain in his eye failed to seep into his vocals, despite his words being slurred with it. Surely the injury had stayed in his dream?

“It's … almost fully white — pale! Like, paler than usual. … A–and there's a scar over it. …” Shatterpaw’s green eyes were wide as he seemed unable to drag his own gaze away. He gestured Charm over to them— “Charm! Come here, I need you!”

“It is … ? Wait, what??” Tentatively, Rapidpaw closed the eye Fury hadn’t injured, and suddenly his breath was dragged out of him.

S!t. It’s ... all blurry ... !* He bolted upright and charged out of the meagerly–woven den. He never realized how fast he was moving, alarm canceling out the agony that stabbed through his skull at every step. He skidded to a stop beside a nearby stream — and what he saw terrified him.

Like a guardian, light from the large moon flooded before him and painted the waters silver. Calm, serene, ghostly — it revealed three jagged scars making their way over his right eye to curl around his muzzle.

Right where the agonizing pain had struck when Fury had attacked him. He ran his paw over them like they were hot coal fresh from a fire, as if trying to prove to himself that they were real. He flinched.

How did it ... ? How did he ... ?

The answer was there, however. Clear as day and as undeniable as the ground underpaw. He didn't want to believe it — *he couldn't*. He let himself tip to the ground, sitting down hard. "Great StarClan. …"

All these dreams that he had been having. …

Of course! I'm so f<king stupid!*

The tall, creepy–looking trees. The dark, dead light. The soggy, rotten floor of the forest.

It was exactly like those nursery tales Flakelight used to tell him all those moons ago.

"Make sure to never agree on anything in there, if you find yourself dreaming." Flakelight had told him gently with a small lick to his head. "The cats there are evil and manipulative — whoever goes there did really, *really* bad things in their lives."

"Don't worry, Mama, I won't!" Rapidkit had promised fervently.

"I mean it." Flakelight's blue eyes had been dark. "The Dark Forest is a dangerous place — it feeds off suffering. It can turn a good cat bad, Rapidkit."

The Dark Forest ... can turn a good cat bad. ... And I had been ***training*** *there!* Rapidpaw shivered as a chill settled in his bones, and it had nothing to do with the night air. *S*!t. I had been sparring ... with traitors and rogues. ...*

And he buried his muzzle into his paws, shame burning like a wildfire and twisting his stomach into knots. *Traitor! I'm a f*<king* ***traitor****. ...*

Charm's scent gently washed over him, and he felt her flank press against his in a silent support. He let out a soft breath and let himself lean into her soft embrace.

"Rapidpaw …" Charm's soft voice was hesitant but gentle nevertheless, "what's going on with you? You've been waking up with more and more aches and injuries recently, and now you just run away when we're so close. …"

Rapidpaw forced himself to concentrate. "It's because … they're not dreams. … T–they were … *never* … just … dreams. …" He felt like he was mostly talking to himself than Charm, but he still faced her.

Charm's brow furrowed, then suddenly she seemed to understand. Her blue eyes softened and she gently ran a soft paw over Rapidpaw's newly acquired scars. "Did it … give you this?"

"Ye–yeah. …" Rapidpaw took in a breath to steady himself. Then, his overwhelming sense of guilt finally spilt out. "Charm— I— the Dark Forest— Mother, forgive me!" He buried his muzzle into her fur, and tears finally released themselves. Again. Another failure. "Another promise *broken*!" *All because of my* ***f**<king stupidity****! "How the hell can I honor her memory like this??*"

"Hey, hey. Calm down, calm down." Charm gently soothed him, pulling him close. "I'm sure Flakelight understands."

"You really think so?" Rapidpaw forced his voice not to tremble pathetically. "Oh, Charm, I … wish I could be so sure. …"

"Then be sure." Charm murmured back. "Every cat makes mistakes, Rapidpaw, and you're no exception."

"But it's not just *any* mistake!" Rapidpaw wailed. "I let her down! Again!"

Charm slowly ran one paw down his back — again and again and again. "How would that be? Your promise was to be a warrior, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was to be a warrior … but— *s*!t*— how can I be one when I–I've … betrayed my *d@*n Clan*?" His voice was hoarse as he barely held back a tragic little sniffle.

Charm parted her jaws to say something in reply, but then—

"*Rapidpaw!!* ***Charm****!!*"

Shatterpaw! The cry was urgent.

Rapidpaw sprang to his paws, ignoring the stab of pain that zapped through his face. "He must have found something." The apprentice realized as Charm hopped to her paws as well beside him. *Or something must have found* ***him****.* Rapidpaw didn't think about that too much, though.

When he and Charm burst through the bushes, it indeed turned out that not just *one* thing had found the little black tom, but *multiple* things.

"Rogues!" Rapidpaw's breath caught in his throat.

Their little camp was, relatively, being raided. Three cats were yowling with triumph, and two in confusion. Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes, and then he found Shatterpaw.

The little tom was backed up against a tree. His lips curled in a hiss of defiance, untrained battle stance topped off with unsheathed claws, he faced off a rogue three times his size. The rogue, however, looked more amused than scared.

And Rapidpaw wasted no time, always.

Letting out a battle cry that would have sent anyone running for their mothers, the prodigy's body slammed the rogue right out of Shatterpaw's way. Tumbling, the stray let out a shriek of shock and rage, but they were fast.

Quicker than lightning, they hissed before swatting at Rapidpaw's muzzle. Even more so quickly, Rapidpaw ducked just out of range of what would have been a blinding blow to the eyes. Snarling, the youth spun around and delivered a devastating blow to the outsider's muzzle, hind legs' muscles honed by moons of river training.

"Rapidpaw!" Shatterpaw's shocked voice snapped his attention back to his friend.

"Go, hide!" Rapidpaw hissed at him. "Don't come out 'til I say!"

"But—"

"Just *go*!" Rapidpaw yowled, willing the young apprentice to move. Maybe, if he was mean enough, Shatterpaw would run to safety.

Finally, Shatterpaw grumbled and scrambled up a tree, using the dark green leaves as camouflage.

Rapidpaw watched him go, but that was enough.

The rouge launched themselves at him once again and bowled the younger over, slamming their large paws onto Rapidpaw's shoulders with ease.

"Clan cats," the rogue tom sneered, "always on the run for each other!"

And in response, Rapidpaw pumped his hind legs in a powerful kick to the rogue's chest, sending the heftier tom stumbling away with a startled grunt. Launching himself upward, he knocked the rogue's sensitive nose with his skull. Yowling, the rogue hopped back a few paces, spitting out all the curses under the sun and moon and stars.

"Because that's what makes us stronger. That's what makes us *better* than you and yer s*!tload of excuses!"

"Then *why* are *we* ***winnin***'?" The rogue whipped around and kicked out with his hind legs, sending a flurry of pain through Rapidpaw's jaw. Then, he again leaped onto him and lifted a row of jet black claws, aiming for a final strike.

Rapidpaw fought hard, always. But when he kicked out again, his legs hit the air.

The rogue has adapted, stronger. Clever, unbeatable.

I guess this is how it ends. He shut his eyes. *I'm so sorry, Flakelight. ...*

A screech suddenly broke through his thoughts. "*Blackout*!!"

The rogue froze mid–strike, and whipped around with an annoyed yowl. "What do you *want*, Balebite?!"

Balebite? Rapidpaw suddenly felt himself freeze, his eyes popping open in shock. *Wait, but isn't he a ...* ***ShadowClan*** *cat?!*

An enraged howl snapped him back to attention. The rogue, Blackout, snarled at Rapidpaw. "I'm not done with you!" Then, he dashed away to aid his ally.

Rapidpaw scrambled onto his paws, muscles still rigid despite the breath of relief that drifted out of his muzzle. He shook out his fur and narrowed his eyes. Who was Balebite having trouble with?

Charm! His breath caught in his throat.

The she–cat was fighting fiercely and mercilessly. Blow after blow she sent at Balebite, and so quickly that it seemed that the storm winds themselves were possessing her paws. Her long fangs bared and pearly in the eerie moonlight, her tortoiseshell and white fur bushed up in defence, she let out a snarl.

It was simply a wonder that she possessed gentle paws who could easily heal a sprained ankle. She was holding her own perfectly fine, he knew, but what if she got hurt?

Rapidpaw hated to think about that.

"Charm! Go, I'll fight him!"

Charm whipped around, then her blue eyes widened. "Rapidpaw—"

"Charm!" A sharp yowl came from behind him, then Blackout slinked into view once again. All fighting ceased with a lift of his tail — *leadership* — and his voice lowered to a dangerously soothing tone. "Charm … it seems that we've finally run into you!" Then, his dark eyes narrowed as he regarded Rapidpaw. "It seems that you two know each other … quite well. Got any–*f**<*king*–thing to say to that … *daughter*?"

Charm froze, her blue eyes rounding a bit. She opened her jaws again and again, as if trying to find the right words. "I … We—"

"Charm! There you are!" Another tom slid out of the gathering crowd. His blue eyes were filled with delight as he gazed at Charm. "I've missed you, my love."

Rapidpaw's breath caught in his throat — but it wasn't awe this time. "Wait, *daughter*? … ***Love***? Charm, what the hell is all this?"

Charm didn't answer. She just looked away — and that said enough.

Suddenly, Rapidpaw had a horrible feeling. "... Charm … ? Are you. …" A sudden desperation swarmed him. "Charm, don't do this— … he's lying, right? They're all lying, right??"

She still didn't answer. She only glanced at him, then glanced away.

"*Right?!*" Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. Anger surged through him. He realized that his voice was a trembling whisper, one filled with so, so many *emotions*. "Charm. … C'mon, please … please tell them they're wrong. …"

"***Ha***!" Blackout suddenly laughed like this was the funniest thing in his life. However, the seemingly amusement didn't last long, for it soon morphed into a furious snarl. "Now I f*<king know what '*travels*' you've been up to, huh?! F*<king *fittin'*, I should say!"

"And so do I." The other tom's eyes narrowed. His dusky brown fur rippled along his spine.

Charm looked desperate. "Look, I— … Vic—"

The other tom, Vic, cut her off with a snarl. "We'll talk *later*. Perhaps." He whipped around and began to storm off before turning to glare at her once more. "And don't f*<kin' call me that no more! You have no right now. To you, I'm Ace, and *no one else*." Then, finally, he stalked away, growling lowly.

Rapidpaw felt his heart drop. Was this a dream, too?

"Charm … you were with him, weren't you?" Instinct took over.

He felt himself bare his teeth, but he wanted to run. Run away from ... *this*. "... It was fake, wasn't it? *It was all f*<king **fake**!*"

Charm snapped her gaze to him, her beautifully *deceptive* blue eyes round and *pleading*. "No, Rapidpaw, it wasn't—"

"Lies!" Rapidpaw snarled, practically yowled, his voice choking up again. "*All d@*n* ***lies***!" He didn't know *what* he was accusing her of lying about, but those were the only words that came to him. He would speak them, sense or no sense — he had to say *something*, after all.

But Charm seemed to know what he was talking about. "Please, Rapidpaw!" She pleaded. "Just listen to me and I can explain—"

"No more." Rapidpaw lifted his head, forcing himself to look firm and unyielding. However, a small sniffle forced itself out of him, not quite completing his facade. "No *f*<king* more!" He backed away, forcing his eyes not to overflow.

And suddenly, *mercifully*, a howl split the air. He snapped out of his daze for enough time to see a blur of black fur launching itself out of the bushes. It landed on Balebite, who on the contrary let out a squeal, more startled than anything. "Eh, what— ?!"

"***You ruined my life***!!"

"Oh, *you* again!" Balebite hissed and bucked, sending his attacker toppling off.

"Shatterpaw!" Rapidpaw felt a fresh wave of frustration. "*What* are you *doing*?!" Why was everything suddenly spinning out of control? He felt his claws flex.

Shatterpaw crouched down as Balebite turned on him, not seeming to hear his companion. Rapidpaw felt his heart stop. Murder was in Balebite's gaze, his white fur spiked in rage. *No!* He knew that look — it infected every cat's eyes while they were fighting an enemy.

But he would not have that.

So, with a snarl, Rapidpaw charged, but for once he was too slow. Balebite struck Shatterpaw with a force that sent the little black tom rolling. A tree stopped his momentum, and he did not get up.

Rapidpaw felt his blood boil. "*Don't you lay a **paw** on my Clanmate!*" With the shrieking battle cry, he launched himself at Balebite as the ShadowClanner tried to launch a final blow. He bowled the tom over and sent a flurry of rabid strikes at his muzzle. Balebite shrieked and kicked up again, sending Rapidpaw stumbling and gasping for air. Before he knew it, Balebite was on top of him, growling threateningly.

"Balebite!" Blackout's sharp address cut through the brawl.

Balebite turned to the dark rogue, and Blackout shook his head. Balebite nodded and leaned in to hiss into Rapidpaw's ear. "I would kill you, but it seems that you've gotten lucky tonight."

"Screw off, fox–heart!" Rapidpaw snarled through gritted teeth.

Balebite lifted a paw, and a sharp pain arched through Rapidpaw's head. Before he knew what was happening, the night closed in like jaws, and all turned to black.

Chapter VII →

`` ***The Colony Of The Blazing Suns***

~~*Wake up. … Wake up. …* ***Wake up***~~*!*

The world came back slowly at first, in the form of dreams. The dreams were never full, however — only snippets of things. Slowly, though — like a current of water flowing into the rapids — things started to come faster and faster. Then, finally, in one surge, a familiar

voice broke into his thoughts: ~~***Wake up!***~~ Suddenly, he remembered the contact of claws to his head and his eyes snapped open. Then, the dream dissolved like mist at dawn. The waking world returned.

Sitting upright with a jolt, his senses blazed alert, only to diminish as he realized that the fighting was over. That was also when he became aware of the throbbing at the side of his head. He groaned softly, rubbing his temples. His muscles stiff and his eyes heavy, he hauled himself to his paws and tried to stretch — but his limbs betrayed him. Too exhausted to really do anything else, he plopped back down to a sitting position, letting out a heavy breath. His ears twitched, however, when a movement to his side caused a rustle.

Shatterpaw grunted. "Wow … my head really hurts. …" The young apprentice rolled over onto his back and blinked a few times, looking around the space that they were in.

"Shatterpaw … ?" Rapidpaw blinked and narrowed his eyes. "What— why—" Then, like one final wave, last night crashed down on him all over again.

The attack.

Blackout and his rogues.

Balebite.

Ace.

… Charm.

He scrunched up his muzzle, and his ears pinned back. *Charm. ... And she's a rogue.* And she didn't really love him. *I thought we had something. ...* He set his jaw. He would brood later. The haze was beginning to lift, details sharpening like claws in the dark. They were in an enclosed, shadowy space, and the scent was … strange. The walls were oddly smooth and dark, and no sunlight was seeping through.

They were trapped, it seemed, and with no way out.

"Shatterpaw." Rapidpaw grunted once again, irritation slowly seeping through the haze of his senses. "Why in *StarClan's name* did you attack Balebite? We could have *not* been in this situation if you would have just simply hidden like I told you to!"

Shatterpaw's ears swiveled over to him, and he rolled over onto his stomach, his dark green eyes flashing. "He tried to kill me!"

"Well, no duh! You attacked him, and he's a *rogue*!"

Shatterpaw narrowed his gaze. "He wasn't *just* a rogue. …"

Rapidpaw furrowed his brow, confusion suddenly mixing with his irritation. "What do you mean? Do you have a *history* with him, or something?" Sarcasm was sharp in his voice. He had not intended it to sound that way, but it had come out that way.

Shatterpaw unsheathed his claws. “See these things? You wonder why they look so big on me, and why they shine so much? That’s because they are not *my* claws. They’re *fake* — *metal*! And you know why?” He continued when Rapidpaw only stared. “That’s because I got *declawed* by *Balebite*.”

“Okay. … But how would you know it was *specifically* Balebite?” Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes skeptically. “It could have been any cat.”

Shatterpaw sheathed his claws again. He took a deep breath before continuing, his green eyes growing distant. “I was born in ThunderClan. My mother was Quailclaw and my father was Taintedskip.” His muzzle curled in disgust. “Quailclaw didn’t even nurse me. Taintedskip ignored me. Then, the leader that was in power then, Snapstar, cast me out because I was too *pathetic* and *small* and couldn’t get my apprentice name.” His ears pinned back. Then, he looked Rapidpaw straight in the eyes. “I was Clanless, Rapidpaw. A Clanless kit on a territory that I couldn’t call my own anymore. I was on the ShadowClan border — the one facing RiverClan — when Balebite attacked me. He left me for *dead*!” Then, Shatterpaw’s gaze sharpened once again, seemingly snapping out of his daze. He averted his gaze. “I know it was him, Rapidpaw. I recognized that scent!”

For a moment, Rapidpaw was silent. Shatterpaw’s story seemed genuine, and attacking a kit didn’t seem a far cry from the character of a rogue. “... And now you want revenge?” Finally, his gaze softened as he let sympathy gently wash away the irritation inside him.

“Don’t tell me that *you* wouldn’t want it.” Shatterpaw grunted, still averting his gaze.

"I wasn't goin' to say that." Rapidpaw regarded Shatterpaw thoughtfully. The tom looked frustrated about something, flexing his claws in and out. He knew how it felt to have so much frustration and anger festering inside. He tipped his head to the side. A small pause passed, then he finally spoke again. "I know how you feel, Shatterpaw." As he said it, he realized that he meant it. "Maybe not, like, directly, but in a way, I relate to you."

Shatterpaw looked up again to meet his gaze. "Really?"

"Yeah." Rapidpaw twitched his ears a bit. Shatterpaw had spilled the beans about his life to him, so now it only felt right that Rapidpaw would return the favor. "You see … when I was young. …" He cleared his throat. Speaking about himself had always been a struggle — he had found that out when he had told everything to Charm. "S*!t— … uh. When I was young — still a kit — greencough was spreading across my Clan. It was, like, really bad — many cats lost their lives … and two of those many were Flakelight and Sparrowkit, my mother and younger sister." He paused before continuing. "When they got sick, I made them a promise, Shatterpaw — I told them … that I would become a warrior … 'n' s*!t … and protect them from everything. Then … 7 sunrises later. …" He shook his head, not having the willpower to finish his sentence. "That gave me drive — a f*<king *purpose*. And when I was apprenticed to a f*<king medicine cat last minute, *right before my d@*n warrior ceremony* —" – he pinned back his ears – "— it felt like betrayal. No, it felt *worse* than betrayal!" He unsheathed then sheathed his claws. He paused again, taking a deep breath, before continuing. "That's why we're here, Shatterpaw. I need to prove it — to them, to *her*, t–to … f*<k, to *myself* — that I'm not just some failure chasing ghosts. But now …" his voice trailed off a little, "... but now, it's as if the whole of f*<kin' StarClan is against that idea." Finally running out of words, he realized that he had been looking away from his companion while

telling his own story. He looked back at Shatterpaw. "So, in a way. … I guess. … Or some s*!t. …"

Shatterpaw had never moved his gaze away from Rapidpaw. A new understanding dawned between them. "... We're not so different," Shatterpaw said, almost surprised by his own words. The young apprentice's dark eyes focused once again. "Rapidpaw? … Can you teach me how to fight?"

Rapidpaw blinked, caught off guard by the sudden question. "Teach you how to *fight* — ? You have Willowfern to do that!"

Shatterpaw twitched his ears, as if suddenly embarrassed. "Willowfern is a good teacher … perhaps, one of the best." His gaze never strayed from Rapidpaw's, however. "But I *saw* you fighting that rogue, Rapidpaw. I *saw* you defend Charm. … You're a *really* skilled fighter. … I thought that you could just … dunno, could just pass some of that down to me … ?"

Rapidpaw furrowed his brow, thinking. He was an apprentice still, no matter his skill, so he couldn't mentor another apprentice, right? *Could* he?

~~*Of course you can.*~~

Rapidpaw whipped around as the voice hissed in his thoughts. He scanned the area.

"Rapidpaw … ?" Shatterpaw tried to catch the other apprentice's gaze.

Rapidpaw turned back around to Shatterpaw. His ears twitched.

~~*What's the matter? Did you not know that I could be in your thoughts as well?*~~

Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. *Fury!*

~~*Indeed.*~~

Rapidpaw's gaze dashed around his surroundings. His heart was pounding in his chest. *Get out of my head!*

~~*Oh, but I can help you teach Shatterpaw! After all ... I'm the one who taught you those moves, eh? After all ... I'm the one who woke you up in the first place. ...*~~

I said to ***get the f*<k out of my head****!*

Fury seemed to chuckle. ~~*You'll thank me later for this ... connection.*~~

Then, all went silent once again.

Rapidpaw felt a breath puff out of him.

Shatterpaw was looking at him, his dark green eyes a little wide. "... Rapidpaw … ?" He tried again. "... A–are you alright … ?"

*S*lt. Did he see that?* Rapidpaw forced his breath to steady. "R–right. Teaching you how to fight. … Okay, I–I'll teach you."

Shatterpaw nodded slowly, however his brow was still furrowed in concern. "Okay. … Thanks."

"Yeah. …" Rapidpaw looked around the enclosure that they were in, half expecting a white and black pelt to flash from the shadows, ruby eyes glowing like a bloody sunset. However, all was silent.

Nothing moved save him and Shatterpaw.

Rapidpaw shuddered, feeling suddenly cold.

*Oh, great **f*<king** skies above. ... Do I really have that kind of a connection to the Dark Forest now?*

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

"Rapidpaw?"

A soft voice drifted through his thoughts. With an irritated grunt, Rapidpaw opened his eyes. Couldn't he get a *second* of peace these days? He hadn't meditated in *forever* — the last time was the night before his warrior assessments — was that too much to ask for, now? "Who is it?" He grumbled, standing up to stretch.

"It's me." Charm peaked out of a small opening. Her sky–blue eyes glittered in the darkness.

"Oh." Rapidpaw's voice came out flat, brittle. Not even trying to sound kind. "You."

"Yeah. …" Charm shifted her paws. Awkward silence fell over them. She seemed to want to tell him something, because she kept on looking at him and looking away.

Rapidpaw's gaze never wavered from hers. He felt his ears pin back. "If you wanna say somethin', spit it out now. Don't worry, no *harm* will be done." The last sentence was tinged with a bitter sarcasm. *What can hurt worse than finding out that the cat you love was cheating on someone with you? … That she was faking it. That she's a rogue. That she was f*<kin' lying—*

Charm let out a soft breath and she faced him again, her eyes urgent and glowing a desperate light. "Look, Rapidpaw, I'm sorry—"

"Save it." Rapidpaw cut her off briskly. He glanced at her, and he saw that her eyes were reflecting the meager light coming through the small opening of which she had entered from.

"Rapidpaw, you think I wanted this?" Charm looked to be practically begging with him. She pinned back her ears a bit. "I can't choose where I was born, or how I was born!"

"The f*<k? You *lied* to me!" Rapidpaw felt himself unsheathe his claws. He looked away, taking a deep breath to steady himself. His voice softened. "I trusted you, Charm. I *trusted* you!" *And I **loved** you!… And I still do, I'm afraid.*

"I trusted you, too." Charm's voice was much softer than usual. "And I still do." When Rapidpaw didn't answer, Charm unsheathed her white claws for a second before sheathing them again. Distress was clear in her gaze. "Maybe then I lied, maybe I didn't want to help you then — but now I don't want to lie to you, and I'm *sorry* that I did! You really think I cared for him? That I *don't* care for you?" A pause, then, "You think I faked *all of that?*"

Rapidpaw twitched his ears and looked back at her. A stubborn spark of hope ignited in his heart. "You … don't love Ace?" *D@*n. Sure makes me trust you* ***sooo*** *much more!*

"Of course not." Charm wrinkled her muzzle. "I never did. I thought that I did, at one time, but that wasn't real. *Real* love feels so much more … genuine — like a flower blooming under the sun of spring." She looked him in the eyes. "You are everything he lacks, Rapidpaw — loyal, caring, resilient, selfless — Ace could never be that, and he never will be. You're like stars in the blackest night — something more, something almost unreal." Suddenly, she turned her gaze away. "You can believe me, or you can not believe me … all I want is for you to know that you were something special to me while we lasted."

It took a second for Rapidpaw to process all that Charm had said. He searched her gaze. Finally, he mustered something, his voice a soft whisper. "Was *that* … true? Genuine?" He shook his head and turned away again. "Just go." He took another deep breath as he felt his voice break a bit. It was too much — he needed to think.

“Rapidpaw —”

“Just f*<king ***go***!”

Charm’s gaze looked conflicted. A soft sigh came from her, then soft pawsteps retreated and her sweet scent faded.

Rapidpaw grunted out a breath. He shifted his weight and tried to settle in a comfortable position once again, wanting to resume his meditation, but no position seemed comfortable. He let out an irritated sigh and stood up to pace restlessly.

Shatterpaw glanced at him. “She might still mean well.” He tried, seemingly guessing at what was bothering him. He rubbed his eyes, yawning a bit.

“Key word: might.” Rapidpaw grunted. He sat down. He needed to do something — anything.

However, his problem was quickly solved when a yowl broke into their little space. “Wake up!” Balebite slid through the opening. His yellow eyes were narrowed. “Blackout needs you.”

Shatterpaw let out a soft growl.

Rapidpaw slowly put a tail in front of his friend. “Not now.” He whispered. Looking back at Balebite, he narrowed his eyes, his voice brisker. “Why would he want us?”

"For a talk." Balebite growled. "Now, follow me, or do I have to drag you?"

Rapidpaw felt his fur bristle. His paws *itched* to attack this traitor for a round two, but with one deep breath he stood up. "Okay. Lead us to Blackout." Without turning his gaze away from Balebite, he murmured to Shatterpaw. "Stay close and follow my lead. If you see anything worth mentioning, just step on my tail or something."

Shatterpaw nodded, his dark green gaze never leaving Balebite.

Balebite narrowed his eyes. "Only *you*." He flicked his tail to Rapidpaw. "Blackout only wants *you*."

Rapidpaw was about to give an irritated and indignant retort, but he stopped himself just in time. *Think, Rapidpaw. You gotta think.* "Will you be okay alone?" He asked, turning to Shatterpaw.

Shatterpaw hesitated. Then, he nodded. "Yeah. … I think so."

"Good." Rapidpaw laid his tail tip onto his friend's shoulders. "I won't be gone for long." Rapidpaw rested his tail on Shatterpaw's shoulder — a quiet reminder of everything he'd taught him.

Shatterpaw nodded. "Okay."

"If y'all are *quite* done." Balebite growled.

Rapidpaw rolled his eyes. Despite himself, though, he dashed up to Balebite. "We're done. Now, take me to Blackout."

Chapter VIII →

`` ***Glimpses***

It turned out that Blackout's little den was some way across the camp that they had been brought to. Rapidpaw wrinkled his muzzle. *We're in a s*!t–filled twolegplace. A s*!t–filled twolegplace filled with s*!t–filled rogues.*

Balebite soon stopped in his tracks. He stepped aside and waved a tail at a small opening. "Get in there. And don't you dare try anythin' funny."

Rapidpaw flicked his tail. "He's the one who wants me there, not me." He snapped back, then slid into the little hole.

The space was small and enclosed. The afternoon light filtered feebly through little holes — like stars. Rapidpaw blinked a few times into the darkness, trying to make his eyes adjust faster, when a voice sounded from behind him. "So, you're him, right?"

Rapidpaw whirled around to see that the entrance had disappeared. "Huh?"

Coppery eyes glowed dimly, barely reflecting the meager light filtering through the holes from above. "You're Rapidpaw?"

"Yes." Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. No, the entrance hadn't disappeared — Blackout was in front of it. The jet black tom's pelt blended in perfectly with the shadows. "And you're Blackout."

"Indeed, I am." The rogue stepped out of the shadows, and two golden … things … glinted in the feeble sunlight. He sat down, elegantly curling his tail around his large paws. A pause, then, "Tell me 'bout y'self, Rapidpaw."

Rapidpaw's ears twitched, caught off guard. "What?"

Blackout flicked the tip of his tail. "Tell me 'bout y'self." He repeated, his tone casual but controlled. "Everything — why were ya given yo name, where you're from, what're ya motives, who's yo friend … how ya met Charm. …" He let his voice trail off as he eyed Rapidpaw with a dark but intense gaze.

"Well. …" Rapidpaw paused, thinking how much information he could give to the rogue. "No one ever told me the … reason for my name. … I'm from beside a lake, and my friend is Shatterpaw. He's a … companion. Me and Charm just simply ran into each other, by chance." Deciding that was enough information, he shrugged. "That's that."

"Hmm. …" Blackout tapped his paws. "Well, Rapidpaw, I reckon ya have somethin' more to say. Perhaps, a few more things to say?"

Rapidpaw didn't answer, deciding to keep it vague.

Blackout narrowed his eyes. A pause, then, "I know, Rapidpaw."

Rapidpaw blinked, confusion furrowing his brow. "What? Know what?"

"Where ya and yo little friend come from. …" Blackout's coppery eyes seemed to stare right through Rapidpaw. "Why ya met Charm in the first place. … I know *everythin*'! All ya little f*<kin' Clan cat secrets!"

Rapidpaw suddenly felt panic rising. *Know **everything**?* There were only two cats that he had told everything to: Shatterpaw and Charm. No one else knew, save himself, why he had come here instead of staying with his Clan. Then, he took a deep breath. *Focus. He's just saying that to scare you.* "Clan cat secrets?" He asked innocently. "I have no secrets. Besides, I already told you everything, so of course you would know everything now."

"Ya play a dangerous game, Rapidpaw." Blackout's voice turned into a slight growl. He flicked a black claw at the two golden things in his ear. "See them piercings? They indicate *leadership*, Rapidpaw. I ain't *stupid*! That's why I brought in one o' yours. So, yeah, my dear river cat: Balebite sold all the information to me."

Rapidpaw forced himself to keep his cool. "... What *exactly* did … Balebite … say?"

"I asked him if he knew anythin' 'bout you." Blackout stated. "He told me that you're an 'apprentice' in ya Clan, hence your suffix or whatever. You're one of the best that RiverClan's ever seen. Fringeflight, the deputy, is ya mentor. Shortly after one of ya fellow apprentices was made a warrior — pretty sure his name is now Silverbrook, may be wrong, though — ya disappeared. Ya wanted to prove y'self as a warrior! Ha!" Blackout took a pause, seeming to recover himself before continuing. "And now, here ya are." He narrowed his eyes. "Anything else ya want to know about y'self?"

Oh, s!t, he **does** know!* Rapidpaw let out a soft growl. "How did he give you such specific details?"

"Ah, no matter." Blackout waved his tail as if brushing off the question. "I didn't really think to ask, nor did I care."

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. Was that a pair of orange eyes glowing behind the rogue leader? He blinked, and then, they were gone.

"Ya said that ya came from a lake, nah?" Blackout asked casually, snapping Rapidpaw out of his thoughts.

"... Yes." Rapidpaw felt his thoughts spin. A rogue leader now knew a lot about his home and the lake. *This is not good. ...*

Blackout was watching him closely. "Tell me, Rapidpaw … have ya ever killed?"

Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side, caught off guard by the sudden question. "What?"

"Have ya ever killed?" Blackout repeated, staring him down.

~~*Say yes.*~~

Rapidpaw pricked his ears, then pinned them back as he recognized Fury's voice. *Why the f*<k should I listen to you?*

~~*It'll be much easier on you if you say yes.*~~

What do you mean?

No answer came.

Blackout, however, was waiting still, his coppery eyes giving away nothing.

"No." Rapidpaw admitted.

~~*Foolish!*~~ Fury muttered.

"Ah. Well, we might be able to fix that." Blackout stood up suddenly. He flicked his tail at Rapidpaw. "Attack me."

"What?"

Blackout flicked his ears. "I said 'attack me'."

Rapidpaw hesitated, then he slowly crouched into a battle position. Then, he charged.

Blackout sidestepped easily. "C'mon! Is this the best apprentice RiverClan has ever had? Give me your *all*!"

Rapidpaw skidded to a stop, then growled. Then, he whipped around and whisked his tail onto the dusty ground, hoping to catch Blackout off guard. Soon, he dashed away into the darkness, away from where the rogue leader was, in an effort to launch a sneak attack.

~~*This won't work.*~~

Yes, it will.

~~*You don't know him, Rapidpaw. ...*~~

There's nothing to know about him. He's just like any other rogue.

Silence.

However, Fury was soon proven right. The dust settled, but Blackout was gone. "You've got a long way to go, kid."

Rapidpaw jumped and whipped around, hissing.

Then, he saw Blackout's dim, coppery eyes glowering from the darkness.

"Great stars." Rapidpaw grunted.

~~*I told you!*~~

Shut up, Fury.

Blackout tipped his head to the side, looking Rapidpaw up and down. Then, he chuckled for the first time. “You have a lot of potential, young fighter.”

“For what?”

“For greatness.” Blackout’s eyes glittered. “Tell me … have you ever thought to be … a part of something? Other than your Clan?”

“Uh— no, not really.” Rapidpaw side–eyed him, confused.

Blackout grunted. Then, he flicked his tail, frowning again. “Go back to your companion — what was his name? Shatterpaw?”

“Yes, Shatterpaw.” Rapidpaw was still confused.

“Get Balebite over here.” Blackout turned away from the entrance. “Oh, and get Ace too.”

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. “Why do you need *them*?”

Blackout’s ears pinned back for a second. “Just do it!”

Rapidpaw glared at him for a moment, then padded to the exit of the den.

Balebite was still standing guard outside, his gaze sweeping over the cats that had begun to mill around. Other rogue colonists.

"Blackout wants you." Rapidpaw grunted. "Bring Ace too."

Balebite narrowed his eyes. "And why should I trust you?"

"'Cause your '*oh-so-glorious' leader* ordered it." Rapidpaw growled, then started to pad to where he had come from.

"You two better not cause any trouble!" Balebite called after him. "Or else—"

"Yeah!" Rapidpaw called over his shoulder. "I know, I get it!"

Balebite growled, then called out for Ace.

Rapidpaw glanced back at Blackout's hideout. He narrowed his eyes. Was it just him, or was that a starry pelt whisking in? He blinked, and it was gone.

What in the ... ?

~~*That's your main problem right there. ...*~~

Rapidpaw twitched his ears. *What do you mean?*

Again, silence.

Rapidpaw sighed and fixed his gaze ahead, making his way around cats and concentrating on getting back to where his friend was hopefully meditating and not sleeping again. However, he suddenly felt cold. Fury's seemingly warning still rang in his ears. *Main problem ... ?* Suddenly, he had an awful feeling in his stomach as realization slowly came to him.

*Am I ... dealing with something **other** than rogues here ... ?*

He could only hope that was not true.

Chapter IX →

`` ***Chipped Fragments***

"You can't trust him, Rapidpaw." Charm was looking him in the eyes, her round, sky–blue irises wide and pleading. "You can't trust anyone here!"

"I didn't say that I could." Rapidpaw answered slowly. "I just meant that I don't understand your father."

While Rapidpaw had been navigating back to his and Shatterpaw's 'den', he had run into Charm again. The girl had led him to a short–cut that skirted the general crowd, then she had pulled him aside when the two had made it safe and sound. She had wanted to know exactly what her father had wanted from him, and Rapidpaw had found himself being honest and telling her that Blackout had seemingly tested his mettle and then had complimented his skill. Now, Charm looked panicked and was begging him not to trust anyone in the Colony for whatever reason.

"Blackout has his … ways." Charm wrinkled her muzzle. "He's a double–dealer, Rapidpaw. He gains trust just to break it." Suddenly, she looked him in the eyes. "You have to leave."

Rapidpaw twitched his ears, caught off guard. "I can't leave, I don't have enough information!"

"You can leave *without* the information." Charm pleaded. "The only important thing is that you found us, right?" She sighed softly. "It's a risk for you to stay here, Rapidpaw! The longer you and Shatterpaw stay …" she glanced at the little black tom, who let out a soft snore, then back at Rapidpaw, "the smaller *both* of your chances are."

"The longer we stay, the more *information* we'll get." Rapidpaw argued. "The more information we'll get, the *higher* chance I have for my Clan to believe me!"

"At least think about it." Charm searched his gaze. "Please, Rapidpaw."

Rapidpaw felt hesitant. Then, finally, he heard himself mutter, "Okay, Charm. … I'll think about it."

"Thank you." Charm looked relieved. She stood up. "I have to go. … But please, think about it hard." With that, the graceful she–cat whisked out of the exit, her bushy tail low and her ears alert.

As he watched her go, Rapidpaw finally felt himself admit something, if not only to himself. *No. No, I'm staying for **you**, Charm. ... I can't let you go!*

~~*Convince her to come with you.*~~ Fury hissed.

To where?

~~*To your Clan, of course. ...*~~

Rapidpaw wasn't sure if she would agree. *But how? She has a life here!*

~~*No, Rapidpaw. ...*~~ A pause. ~~*Surely you know this? She has a life with **you**.*~~

Rapidpaw felt his heart leap and jump as Fury hissed the next words: ~~*Wherever you'll go, she'll go. ... She wants to keep you safe. ... She* ***loves*** *you, Rapidpaw.*~~

Sh–she does ... ? For whatever reason, Rapidpaw felt himself believing the Dark Forest warrior. Maybe it was only the desperation that he found himself feeling — the sheer need for confirmation of Charm's love. He pinned back his ears, realizing how much he actually craved for her to come with him, to say three words to him. Just once.

At least once.

~~*Yes, Rapidpaw. She loves you. She always has, my dear apprentice. ...*~~

Rapidpaw pinned back his ears, forcing himself to come back to his senses. *How do you know all this? And why should I trust you?*

~~*I'm your mentor, Rapidpaw. ... Of course you can trust me. ...*~~ Fury seemed to chuckle. ~~*Oh ... I know a* ***lot*** *of things, Rapidpaw. ... I'm not young and youthful like you. ...*~~

Then tell me what you know!

Fury was silent for a second. Then: ~~*I can't tell you a lot, Rapidpaw. ... You're not ready yet. ...*~~

And ***why*** *am I not ready?*

~~*You're too emotionally ...* ***distraught*** *... at the moment.*~~

I'm not, though!

Silence.

Rapidpaw sighed softly. *Ugh, fine! Tell me what you can.*

A small pause, then Fury hissed once again. ~~*All I can tell you, Rapidpaw, is that the hawk comes from above. ... You will never see it until it's too late ... unless you look really closely.*~~

Tell me more. I'm all ears. Rapidpaw told him eagerly.

Silence.

Rapidpaw grunted irritably. "Figures." He muttered, and sat down to wash himself. "Never tellin' me nothin'. ..."

He was still muttering to himself when Shatterpaw finally stirred from a seemingly deep sleep. "Mhm ... ! That was a *good* nap!" He sat up, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "Feel like I've been sleeping all day ... !"

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes at the small apprentice. "Yeah, and you were *supposed* to be *meditating*."

Shatterpaw yawned and stretched. Then, seemingly realizing that Rapidpaw was talking to him, he pricked his ears. “Eh— what?”

Rapidpaw rolled his eyes, not being able to help but to let out a sigh. “Nevermind.” He sat up and stretched. “I think you’ve meditated enough. … You’re ready for some … ‘proper’ training now.”

“Really??” Shatterpaw beamed from ear to ear.

“Yeah.” Rapidpaw paused, thinking. Then, he backed away until he was facing Shatterpaw, then flicked his tail. “Attack me.”

Shatterpaw crouched down slowly into a, more or less, battle position. Then, the little tom charged … it was painfully slow, however.

Rapidpaw sidestepped, and he felt his whiskers twitch. *Oh, StarClan, he doesn’t know much. ..*

Shatterpaw charged past him and whipped around, his ears pinning back slightly. “Sorry, this isn’t my best day—”

“Nah, nah. No need to worry.” Rapidpaw reassured his friend. “That’s a good start, but there is always room for improvement.” He padded over to his friend. “Lemme see that crouch again.”

Shatterpaw, once again, obediently crouched into battle position.

Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side. He nudged the young apprentice's back so that he would crouch lower. "Your hindquarters are a tad bit too high. You have to crouch lower so that you'll have enough muscle strength and leverage to have power when you start your charge." He tapped Shatterpaw's front paws. "These need to be more out so that you can boost your run —" – he nudged Shatterpaw's head so that it would be lower – "— and your head needs to be lower and your ears flat so that you can gain speed quicker." He paused, then nodded. "Try charging now."

Shatterpaw bunched his muscles. He waited for a second, then, he shot forward, soon skidding to a stop. "Whoa!" He laughed. "That *does* make it much easier!"

"Yeah!" Rapidpaw finally felt a small smile make its way up his muzzle. "Try it again. Then, once you have it, we can go over general confrontation."

"Awesome!" Shatterpaw beamed at Rapidpaw. Then, he slowly lowered himself into the battle crouch … but his paws were not positioned right once again.

Rapidpaw, suppressing a sigh, nudged Shatterpaw's hind legs lower and nudged his front legs to be more out. "There. Now, try it again."

This time, however, Shatterpaw jumped up too soon, and his head wasn't low enough, so his charge was much slower.

"Here." Rapidpaw breezily suppressed an impatient twitch of his ears as he padded back over to the apprentice. He crouched down into battle crouch, making sure that his position was perfect even though, by now, it was second nature to him. "Copy me."

Shatterpaw narrowed his eyes, then copied Rapidpaw's pose, but it wasn't exact. Again. The same mistakes, over and over again.

Rapidpaw sighed heavily and fixed Shatterpaw's position. "There. Now, memorize that."

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

Training.

It took a little longer for Shatterpaw to learn than Rapidpaw had taken, that was for sure. Rapidpaw was still teaching the same thing — the *same* crouch — when Balebite's voice cut off his instructions.

"Rapidpaw … Shatterpaw, Blackout has sent me to inform y'all two that he has given official permission to each of you to eat from the Colony Of The Blazing Suns's fresh–kill pile." The mostly white tom poked his head around the entrance to the den, his pale yellow eyes narrowed and his voice flat and grumpy.

Shatterpaw hissed, and Rapidpaw laid a tail tip on the apprentice's shoulders, giving him a look. *Not now, Shatterpaw. Not now.* Then, he turned back to Balebite and grunted. "Tell Blackout that we thank him thoroughly for his … generosity."

All Balebite gave in reply was a grumpy silence, then he whisked out of the den.

"Well!" Rapidpaw asserted when Balebite's scent had long started to fade. "That seems to call for a little break. It's no good to train on an empty stomach."

"Yeah." Shatterpaw huffed. "A break would be *real* nice."

"Then c'mon." Rapidpaw whisked out of the exit of the den, waiting for Shatterpaw outside. Soon, however, he found himself searching for a familiar tortoiseshell and white pelt. Maybe Charm could share some food with him? Then, he lowered his gaze. *I can't keep on doing this, looking for her as soon as I get the chance. ...* He wanted to, though — oh, so badly — to just see her face, despite it all … because he knew that, one day, he wouldn't be able to see her soft smile anymore.

~~*You will see her soon. ... Just call out her name and she'll come. ... Then, you can convince her to leave with you. ...*~~ Fury advised.

What if ... I just don't leave? The thought was strange, and it surprised even him. He knew that he shouldn't think that … and yet he couldn't take it back. He knew that Charm couldn't leave, and yet *he* needed to leave. …

He wanted to stay. To stay with her. Then, his loyalty to RiverClan screamed at him to take it back and to not think nonsense. She had *lied* to him, for StarClan's sake! Why did he still want her?

~~*It's completely natural to think like that, Rapidpaw. ...*~~

It's not natural. Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. *It's disloyal.*

~~*Love is never disloyal, Rapidpaw ... let alone* ***true*** *love. ...*~~

If our love is so true, why did she lie to me? She said that she was going to help me when we first met ... and now look where we are!

~~*But she* ***did*** *help you, didn't she? She helped you find the Colony. ...*~~

She did. ... Rapidpaw sighed, settling down. *But ... I really thought ... I really thought we had something ... and now that I know she's engaged with someone else ... I'm not so sure. ...*

~~*Y'all* ***did*** *have something, Rapidpaw ... and you still do. ... All you have to do is say the three words and she'll come with you. ...*~~

Really ... ?

~~*Really. ...*~~

How do you know?

~~*Because, Rapidpaw … I knew her mother's heart while I was still second–in–command … and if she's anything like Flicker … she'll follow you wherever you go, just like she followed Blackout. … You just have to say the word, like he did. …*~~

Why are you telling me this?

~~*Because … I'm your mentor, Rapidpaw. It's my duty to teach my apprentice all I know. …*~~

For a second, strangely enough, Rapidpaw found himself actually considering Fury's words. Fury was a Dark Forest warrior, and Rapidpaw didn't want to trust him … and yet, he did want to trust him. Taking a deep breath, finally coming to a conclusion, he looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of Charm's tortoiseshell and white pelt.

"Uhhhhhhhh … hello? Are we going to eat or not?"

Rapidpaw pricked his ears. He hadn't noticed that Shatterpaw had long whisked out of their den. The young apprentice was eyeing him, his ears twitching and annoyance glinting in his eyes.

"Right. …" Rapidpaw took a deep breath, bringing himself back to reality. "Follow me, and keep close." He squinted through the jumbling crowd, trying to think where the fresh–kill pile would be. However, half of his mind was still on what Fury had told him.

I have to go home soon … but I can't leave Charm. Fury had planted a stubborn seed of hope in him, it seemed.

Perhaps, there was a chance for them.

Perhaps, he *could* stay with her.

He only had to convince her to come back to RiverClan with him.

Chapter X →

`` ***Lies and Divisions***

Rapidpaw grunted and lifted one paw to scratch vigorously at his ear, unsheathed ivory claws still glinting in the dim light. "Stupid rash … where did I even get this again?"

"You got it from sticking your head where it doesn't belong, also known as a barbed fence." Charm sighed. "C'mon, quit scratching it. You'll only make it worse."

"I did *not* 'stick my head' into the fence! How was I supposed to know that the ground was so slippery? Besides, I *need* to scratch it." A sharp sigh escaped the tom's maw and his paw met the ground heavily once again. "It's *itchin'* like there is a *whole army of ticks* on it!"

"That's because …" Charm looked over his ear, pointedly restraining his twitching paw, "the mesh gave you tiny scratches, and now you aren't letting it heal and're making it swell even more."

"Great stars above." Rapidpaw muttered. "Are you *sure* that you don't have any … soothin' herbs or whatever?"

"I already told you," Charm explained gently, "the city ran out weeks ago."

"Yeah, yeah." Rapidpaw grumbled. He sighed and laid down, staring up at the cloudy sky, the tops of the buildings vanishing into cloud as if they were the towering oaks of the Dark Forest. "Whatever."

There had been a few sunrises since Rapidpaw and Shatterpaw had been caught by Charm's father, Blackout, who was also the leader of a rogue Colony called the Colony Of The

Blazing Suns. Rapidpaw had lost count of the days — all he knew was that at least half a moon had passed. *I **need** to go home.* He missed his beloved river. Yet, spending time with Charm made him forget about the rest of the world, and he wanted to always have it that way.

"You know that I need to leave soon." Rapidpaw had told her a few sunsets before. "You know that me and Shatterpaw don't belong here … we're RiverClan cats, through and through. *I'm* a RiverClan cat, through and through! … And I miss my Clan, despite it all." He had taken a deep breath, readying himself for denial. "... So, I've been thinking … what if … you come back … with me … to RiverClan … ?"

Charm's eyes had lingered on his for a second. "I … " Finally, she dropped her gaze. "I'll think about it, Rapidpaw. I promise."

And she was still thinking about it.

Rapidpaw had been able to join hunting — or scavenging — patrols for a little bit now. Charm always went with him. She always pointed out the best scavenging grounds, where to go and where not to go, and had generally taught him how to survive in the city. This time, however, Charm had failed to warn him soon enough about the fence mesh. He had chased a mouse to it and had slipped, his head colliding with the little thorns. Now, there he was, sitting in camp and sulking while Charm was watching over him and his swollen ear.

He wanted to close his eyes, to try meditation at least, but the city's sounds were thunder to his ears, never letting him concentrate — never even letting him sleep sometimes. Besides,

he didn't trust to close his eyes when in the Colony's camp — he may have been there for half a moon, but he was still not used to it.

It was too different.

In his musings, however, a sudden thought struck him.

What if, when he returned to RiverClan … Mockingstar and Fringeflight *still* didn't believe him, despite the evidence of rogues that he had gathered? What was he going to do? All of this would be wasted!

~~*Tell Fringeflight everything … and he'll believe you.*~~ Fury drawled pointedly.

How do you know?

Silence. Then— ~~*Trust. … Close your eyes, Charm will guard you. … Go to sleep and rest, and I'll tell you. …*~~

Why— A sudden, heavy sleepiness invaded Rapidpaw's senses mid–thought. Head lulling to the side, the boisterous city rapidly faded into the background and his eyelids dropped closed. It wasn't a long time before he found himself opening them once again to see the black trees of the Dark Forest once again.

"How in the *f**<*k*?!" Rapidpaw whirled around, eyes wide, scanning his surroundings frantically. "Wha— you can *send* me into this place now??"

“Always could.” A familiar, slow low rasp came from in front of him, and Fury’s crimson eyes glowed from the shadows. Soon, the white and black tom was in full view. But there was no more malice in those reds — simply a subtle curiosity. “I just never did. Until now.”

“Why’d you send me back here?” Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. “This is not where I need to be!”

“Oh, but it is.” Fury walked in a casual way, however, his tail was curled low. “And don’t you worry, you’re not here to train — I just needed to tell you something, in person. To show you something, in person.”

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. “Then show me.”

“Then follow me.” With that, Fury whisked back into the shadows.

Rapidpaw grunted in frustration, but followed the Dark Forest cat anyways, muttering to himself.

“Just keep close.” Fury continued walking. “Stay on my tail and you should be clear.”

“Clear from what?” Rapidpaw fluffed out his fur against the chill.

“Why, from the other residents here, of course.” Fury’s eyes sparkled as he looked back at Rapidpaw with a grin, before turning back and making a sharp turn. “The most infamous,

treacherous cat you've ever known in all the Clans? Yeah, those skills came from *here*, little apprentice. But, then again. …" Fury paused in his tracks, and parted his jaws as if scenting the air, before continuing on. "Then again, no cat is what he seems, eh?"

"Oh, for s*!t's sake. …" Rapidpaw suddenly had a bad feeling in his stomach, though.

"Patience, patience. I'll show you in a second." Fury soothed, slowly swishing his tail through the air.

"Why not show me *now*?" Rapidpaw objected sharply.

"Because we're not there yet." Fury answered simply.

"And *when* will we be there?" The longer Rapidpaw stayed asleep in the open, the more of a chance the rogue Colony cats got in catching him off guard.

"In a second." Was all Fury offered as an answer.

Apparently, however, 'in a second' translated to 'in forever' for Fury, because Rapidpaw felt like his paws were about to fall off by the time Fury paused and flicked his tail for Rapidpaw to come forward. "Look here."

"Yeah, trees, so what?"

"Look closer."

Rapidpaw squinted his eyes at the trees before his tail curled in intrigue. Was it only him, or was that a glow coming out from between the shadows? He took a step closer, then another and another, until finally he pushed through the dead foliage and his eyes widened. “What the—! What in *hell* is that?!”

Before him was a wall of pure starlight. Dead vines, brambles, and trees almost choked out the silver light, clinging to it as if it were their only source of ground. But that wasn’t the worst part. The foliage looked almost alive here. Rapidpaw craned his neck up, and the wall continued on and on and on and on, rising up and into forever.

“That’s *our* border.” Fury informed him, his red eyes narrowed as he stared at the wall of stars. “The border keeping us Dark Forest residents from paradise.”

“You mean StarClan?” Rapidpaw wanted to take a step forward to look at it closer, but his paws were rooted to the soggy ground. He searched Fury’s gaze. “Why are you showing me this?”

Instead of answering, however, Fury took a step forward. Winding one of his front paws back, he suddenly struck the barrier. It hummed as ripples of energy pulsed from Fury’s sudden blow. The Dark Forest tom stumbled back before blinking rapidly as though dizzy. “... It’s impossible for cats like me to go through to the other side.” He stated, shaking out his paw. Then, looking back at Rapidpaw with those blood red depths of his, he nodded to the barrier. “Now, Rapidpaw, *you* try.”

"What— *me*?" Rapidpaw stared at Fury, caught off guard.

"It's okay." Fury slowly guided Rapidpaw closer to the barrier. "It may have stunned me, but you should be fine."

"'Should'?"

"Just trust me."

Rapidpaw glanced at Fury as the Dark Forester backed away. "... Okay." Taking a deep breath and facing the starry wall once again, he braced himself, then charged at it.

"I don't think you have to—" But Fury's voice melted away as though never there at all.

Suddenly, Rapidpaw was plunged into a short tunnel. Then, he let out a startled yelp as he tumbled out into an open field. Digging his claws into the ground, he just barely stopped his momentum from causing him to crash into nearby foliage. Quickly hoping to his paws, he whirled around, scanning his surroundings, and squinted his eyes as he realized where he had just landed.

StarClan's hunting grounds.

"Skies above … Fury was right!" Rapidpaw gasped, blinking a few times as if trying to see if the stars were real. He glanced back at where the barrier was supposed to be, when suddenly a snarl sounded from behind.

"Hey! You! Stay where you are! You're not from here!"

Rapidpaw jumped and whipped around with an indignant squeak. "Whu— huh?!"

A mottled brown and ginger she–cat was glaring at him, her fur fluffed up and her green eyes blazing. "You heard me, *Dark Forest skum*! Scram!"

"I'm not—"

"Don't think I'm dumb!" The she–cat showed her teeth. "I saw you pass the barrier from that cursed place!"

"I'm dreaming!" Was he going to get *kicked* out of StarClan? "I swear!" It would be a bad sign if he did.

"Dreaming?" The she–cat relaxed, seemingly softening a little, however, her eyes were still skeptical. Slowly, she circled around him, looking him over. She parted her jaws to scent the air, then lowered her hackles. "Ah, you're a living cat! It's been a hot while since cats dreamed of the Dark Forest." She side–eyed him, a glint of mischief in their leafy depths. "Did you run away from training?"

"No, not at all!" This she–cat seemed to know something about the Dark Forest. "I just … ran into the barrier." Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side. "You talk about it as if you've been there before."

"I have." The she–cat's eyes sparkled. "That's why I was chosen to guard this." She put one paw onto the top of the tunnel. "Down here is the barrier — I was one of the cats that got past it because a StarClan cat let me."

"'Let you'? They can do that?" Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes.

"Only if they escort you!" She flicked her tail. "Anyways, I don't know his name, all I know is that he had black fur and small little white spots all over him — I'm not gonna lie, he looked pretty strong. I think he was a leader before he lost his life. It was pretty cool, honestly. He was nice 'n' stuff and—"

Fallenstar. Rapidpaw felt his tail start to lash. "And *why* did he choose … you?"

"Because I did StarClan service while I was in the Dark Forest." The she–cat dipped her head humbly. "I made them aware of the cats in there wanting to break through the barrier and to get access to the paradise here. So now, here I am." She lifted her tail.

"So now *you* have access to it, but no other Dark Forest cat does?"

"Oh, there's been a few cats from there that were assigned to guard." She flicked her ginger striped tail dismissively, a hint of pride in her gaze. "Their memory just faded, and new ones were assigned. There were not always Dark Forest cats, though. Most were StarClan cats. I am one of the few that came from the Place of No Stars that's trusted! Isn't that *awesome*? I know, I'm great."

For a second, Rapidpaw remained silent. *If Fallenstar went through the barrier and into the Dark Forest before, that means that **any** StarClan cat can go through, but no cat from the Place of No Stars can come through without permission. Is **this** what Fury wanted to show me?... Why? What does this have to do with Fringeflight believing the truth?* He refocused his gaze back to the she–cat. "Hey — I've failed to catch a name."

"Sparksnap." The she–cat smiled warmly.

"Sparksnap — thank you for telling me this." Rapidpaw dipped his head to her.

Sparksnap dipped her head back. "My pleasure."

Letting it leave like that, Rapidpaw dashed back down into the tunnel. Sparksnap called to him, "Wait! You can wake up from—" but he was already through.

Stumbling back to the side of the Dark Forest, Rapidpaw steadied himself and shook out his fur. The last of the sparkles that had settled on it flew away and vanished into the darkness.

Fury was idly washing himself when his red eyes landed on Rapidpaw once again. "Ah, there you are." The white and black tom stood up, lean muscles twitching as they relaxed from his stretch before sitting down again. "So. What did the blabbermouth tell ya?"

"You know about her?"

"Of course I do." Fury yawned. "What did Sparksnap tell you?"

"She told me that …" Rapidpaw wrinkled his muzzle, gathering his thoughts, "that Dark Forest cats can be chosen to guard the barrier, and that they can come through the barrier only if a StarClan cat escorts you."

"And that StarClan cats can come through willingly." Fury searched Rapidpaw's gaze. "Did she tell you that Fallenstar chose her? That he is the only one who has gone through it in generations?"

"'Only one'?" *She didn't tell me* ***that*** *s*!t.* Rapidpaw leaned in, ears pricked.

"Indeed, only one." Fury started pacing, tail pashing. "A few nights before your warrior assessments, Fallenstar came through. He found me thanks to Sparksnap. *That's* the real reason he chose her to guard the barrier. It was no rebellion s*!t — that's just a lie that he told her to sell to make it convincing."

A few nights before my assessments! That's exactly when Goldleaf told me that she got her prophecy. Rapidpaw felt his fur prickle uncomfortably. *Hold on. …* Fury was talking about a … "'Lie'?"

"He found me and made a deal." Fury continued instead of answering, his gaze wandering over to the barrier once again. "He told me to visit you after your warrior ceremony and to train you. To get you stronger, he said. He also told me that, if I do so, I will be given a free passage into StarClan. I mean, who wouldn't comply?" Fury shrugged. "So, every night, he used to come here and ask, 'How is he?' and I would answer, 'Fabulous, greater than great.'

Then, one night, he didn't come. Then the next, and the next, and the next." Fury's voice heightened to a snarl. "Now that I see you could go through, I realize that there is no such thing as a 'free passage to StarClan' — it was all made up!" Fury paused, taking a deep breath in and unsheathing then sheathing his claws. "He lied to me, Rapidpaw. I remember, a little bit ago, while Sparksnap was still wandering here, how she told me that cats that train here are considered traitors. I had dismissed it then, but now … I see it, Rapidpaw, that this was Fallenstar's attempt to hold you down from your *true* destiny."

"Hold me down?" Rapidpaw's heart skipped a few beats.

Fury looked Rapidpaw in the eyes, freezing the apprentice with the intensity in them. "You're a warrior, Rapidpaw, through and through. You're no healer nor medicine cat — your flame belongs to a fighter." He leaned to the point that his whiskers roughly brushed Rapidpaw's. "What, exactly, did your medicine cat tell you?"

"She just told me that it was 'StarClan's will' after—"

"That's a lie." Fury interrupted briskly. "It's *Fallenstar's* will. He—" Suddenly, he stiffened.

"He … ?" Rapidpaw prompted, his ears pricked forward.

Fury swiveled his ears. He parted his jaws and scented the air. "You're needed."

"Oh, c'mon!" Rapidpaw protested, irritation heightening his voice. "Just quickly tell—"

"No, you're needed *now*." Fury interrupted.

Then, it was over.

Rapidpaw slowly blinked awake. The clouds had broken open into a soft drizzle. Rolling onto his stomach, he pushed himself to his paws and stretched. Irritation was all he could feel, and he let out a low grumble. "*Of course* — just when I was *finally* gonna get some answers. …"

"Rapidpaw!" Shatterpaw was beaming at him, Charm at his side. "You're finally awake! C'mon, the noon patrol is due."

"Right, right. …" Rapidpaw grumbled, hopping to his paws and trotting over to them. Head still spinning from Fury's words, he narrowed his eyes as the drizzles were replaced by the steady rains of leaf–fall.

According to the rogue from the Place of No Stars, Fallenstar had lied. *'It's* ***Fallenstar's*** *will' ... ? So he ...* ***made it up****?* That would explain the suddenness of his apprenticeship to Goldleaf. Tilting his head up to the ever greying sky, he narrowed his eyes against the driving rain. *Welp, now* ***that*** *seems to be clear now. ... Maybe. ...* But …

Why*? Why would Fallenstar do this?* Wasn't the leader his *father*? Why would a parent do that to his son? In the back of his mind, however, he knew the answer. He simply ignored it.

Fallenstar did not want Rapidpaw to become a warrior. And if the apprentice wanted to claim the destiny that he had set for himself, he had to pause and think. *Again.* He had to figure out a way of unraveling lies before they turned into divisions that could never be undone. If they did … he wasn't sure if there *would* be a Clan for him to serve as a warrior.

Well, s*!t.

I need to leave, and I need to leave soon. ... Oh, Charm, please come with me. Please don't force me to choose.

Chapter XI →

`` ***The Last Goodbye***

(/) Rapidpaw couldn't sleep.

Dreams never came these nights; if they did, they were only in unmemorable snippets that floated in and out of his headspace. Sleep itself was rather a rarity now, drawing him in only to kick him right back out when it came. The city in the distance was no help.

Rapidpaw curled tighter around himself before turning to the side. No position was comfortable — it was like his nest of manageably-soft debris had turned to stone. Then, finally, he gave up with a grunt of frustration and heaved himself onto his paws. His jaws parted slightly to let an airy sigh escape from between them, a sound soft and exhausted. Blue eyes panning forward again, tabbied paws moved to the outside.

Instinctively, he took a breath of the outside air, but regretted it right after. The air was bitter, smokey in a way that was more rancid than wet ashes. He retched and pawed his nose, nausea swooping in to twist his belly.

But he should have known better.

Even here, the air was tainted — so tainted he could almost see the fumes from the sleepless monsters that echoed just outside the Colony's large premises. Even here, at the edge of where the city had been long deserted, the air was poisoned. Silently, the grey-ish blue tabby tom retreated into the alleyway, head low and paws making no sound but silence.

The red towering walls were scarcely lit, only every so often did the yellow light from the twoleg–made stars bathe the tall barriers in a warm but dying light. Or were the stars called lightbulbs? Charm had mentioned something about lightbulbs. He paused his pace, and tilted his head up to the sky where darkness descended.

No stars.

He missed the serene little lights that flecked the sky every night. He missed the gentle, soothing rush of the river gurgling around RiverClan's camp. He missed the sound of reeds gently bumping into each other. He missed the sound of silence.

He missed home.

He wanted to feel *home.*

He wouldn't. He *couldn't.* Not until Charm agreed or rejected his proposal to her coming with him. Charm had never given him a reply; much to his frustration, she had approached him with her *own* proposal:

"I'll come to you and Shatterpaw when I figure out an escape window for y'all." Charm had murmured to him on one scavenging patrol.

Rapidpaw let out another sigh and sat down heavily onto the hard concrete, ears pinned against his lowered head. *StarClan, if you can hear me ... please let her come with me.* He felt his hackles rise. *No.* He set his jaw. *No. I don't need them and their s*!ty prophesies.* He would make it happen. *I'll just try harder and I **will** make it happen.*

He wasn't sure if he *could* try harder, though.

He closed his eyes. Maybe some needed meditation would help.

'Pit–pat.'

Rapidpaw's ears swiveled to aim behind him.

'Tip–tap.'

Rapidpaw hopped to his paws and whirled around, teeth bared by instinct. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

"It's just me." A soft and familiar voice drifted to his ears.

Rapidpaw felt his hackles settle, tension slowly dissipating but still very there. He tested the air, and the soothing scent of vanilla in bloom washed over him. “Charm. … What are you doing here?”

Blue eyes blinked from the darkness. The tortoiseshell then stepped out of the overhanging shadows, her graceful body following shortly after her head. Her blue eyes were troubled, and her ears were pinned back.

For a moment, the pair stared at each other, standing on opposite sides of the dark alleyway. Then, Charm finally broke the heavy silence that seemed to last forever. “Rapidpaw … I just wanted to ask you one last time. …” She trailed off.

“I’m listenin’.” Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side, ignoring a sudden awful feeling that settled in his stomach.

“... Do you really want to leave?”

“I want *you* to *come* with *me*.” Rapidpaw held her gaze, searching those blue depths of hers. “*Please*, Charm. …” Was it only him, or were the she–cat’s irises reflecting the dim light better than they should?

“Rapidpaw. …” Charm trailed off again, her gaze never leaving his before it dropped. The she–cat seemed to take a deep breath before continuing. “I’ve found a shortcut out the city. … Ya just have to go to the end of this alleyway ‘n’ slip through the first hole you see. Follow

the fresh scent an' the feel of the wind, and yer out. It's the safest I could find — … I've already sent Shatterpaw there, and told him t' wait for you once he's out."

"Come with me." Rapidpaw insisted, pinning back his ears.

She hesitated.

"C'mon!" Rapidpaw begged, his tone taking on a sharper edge. "Surely it's not so hard to say 'yes'? I mean—"

"It *is* hard!" Charm's fur suddenly fluffed up in defense. "You think I want to just … *go away*?" Then, the agitation left her gaze. "Don't talk bulls*!t, Rapidpaw." There was a certain softness in her words that set him on edge. "You know that I … *can't* leave."

"Why *the f*<k* not?" Rapidpaw demanded. "It's not like y' *want* t' stay … *right*?"

"No, I don't." Charm admitted, looking away. "But if I come with ya, I could lead Blackout straight t' the lake with my scent trail. And *no*, I *can't* cover it. A parent knows their kit's scent, Rapidpaw. Besides, who would be the distraction for the escape?"

"We can *think* of somethin'!" Rapidpaw objected sharply. "And we're not scared of him. We can fight off a bunch o' f*<kin' rogues, no problem!" Was that Charm flinching? The movement had been so small, he might as well have imagined it. "Besides, why would he follow yer scent in the first place? I thought you guys, like—"

"Because that's what he *wants*." Charm interrupted, her intense gaze shocking him to silence. "That's why he's keepin' you and Shatterpaw here, an' bein' so 'kind' to both o' ya — he wants both o' your trusts, Rapidpaw, to use it *against* y'all and to take more *land*. He's *targetin'* the Clans 'cause they're *dominant* beside the lake — maybe even in these parts! We call 'em — er, y'all — the '*Apex Groups*' for a reason." Almost bitterly, the Healer added — "And *nobody* is allowed to be stronger than Blackout." She paused. "I can't risk it. … I don't want to do this, believe me, it's difficult — but I can't be … *selfish* … an' throw away yer *safety* for … for my own happiness."

"What about *my* f*<kin' happiness?!" Rapidpaw interrupted forcefully. "Why not come for *that*?!"

Charm was silent for a moment — a moment that seemed to last moons. He was starting to regret raising his voice, when she looked away. "Please, understand. I'm doin' this for *us*."

"It's not going to help *us*." Rapidpaw hissed. He felt his throat and lungs close up, breathing becoming difficult as though something were *squeezing* from the inside. "F*<kin' h3*l, there *is* no 'us'— !"

"There has *always* been *us*." Charm interrupted softly.

Rapidpaw felt his heart skip a thousand beats, freezing him in place. *Is she … ?*

"Maybe not to you," Charm continued softly, sky blue locking onto pale navy, "but to me, there *always* has been. Ever since I saw ya in that patch of woods, huntin' down my very

scent. Your eyes carried a … a *truth* that I could never find in anyone else. Rapidpaw, take this as you will, but I cannot deny. …" She took a deep breath as she hesitated. Then —

"I love you, Rapidpaw. I love you so, so much."

For a moment, silence stretched out between them as Rapidpaw fought for the right words — no, for any words at all. Time seemed to freeze around him, and suddenly, he was blind to the alleyway; the harsh, flickering city lights. He only saw her, and her beautiful eyes. As if in the distance, he heard himself stutter — "Charm … Charm, I— …" he couldn't finish his sentence. Joy was supposed to be ignited and ablaze in his heart, but his world was tearing at the seams, and he couldn't do anything to stop it.

"Here." Charm reached up to her ear. Something gold shimmered from there — a golden earring, unnoticeable with her patchy ginger fur until taken off. She leaned down to get closer to him, there then was a soft *'click'*. Hesitating, a second passed before the she–cat pulled away. "My mother gave me that, and I give it to you now. … For good luck." As he sat there, frozen in place, she nuzzled him gently. Then, she pulled away once again, hesitating before speaking. "You … you need to— … go." Her voice broke slightly. "Goodbye, my dear. We might even meet again, if only in battle."

"I love you, too. …" Rapidpaw finally breathed out the words, but she was already gone.

As if she had never even been there at all.

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It didn't take long for Rapidpaw to find the opening Charm had told him about. His pawsteps were sluggish, however, so it took him longer to find his way out of the tunnel than it should have. Then, he felt the breeze, and he froze. He looked behind himself once again, knowing that he'll find emptiness and not the face that he wished to see.

She loved me this whole time.

She threw me away!

I was forced to throw her away.

She was forced to throw me away.

...

***I** threw her away.*

The thoughts bounced around his skull like an overactive grasshopper, plaguing him with a feeling that welcomed itself in. *Sensations* that were there this whole time, but unseen or heard until tonight.

Grief.

Grief, grief, grief — he hadn't realized it, but he had felt their downfall this whole time. Him being with her had softened the dread, but now. …

He emerged into the night, the air much clearer there than in the Colony Of The Blazing Suns's camp. He couldn't get himself to enjoy the air.

Freedom, indeed it was. The feeling was there, but it was dull.

Nothing should have come with that price — not the one that he had paid tonight.

Not even freedom.

But the last goodbye was done, and it was over.

So, sitting down on the ground heavily. Not knowing what else to do, he tilted his head to the starless sky, and *everything* poured out in one wordless wail of loss.

Chapter XII →

`` ***Blitz***

From then on, the days seemed to last a moon each, the trek more tiring than it had ever been. His paws dragged, and his head was low — it was as if the weight of the world had suddenly settled on his shoulders and was slowly crushing him. He barely even stopped to hunt or to check their direction — all he did was walk until nightfall, then curled up to sleep alone.

"I'm not sure we're still heading in the direction to the lake." Shatterpaw observed from beside him. "How long was it — 5 sunrises? Plus," he sniffed at the ground, "I don't remember this trail."

Rapidpaw said nothing in return, however, just keeping his gaze forward.

Again, silence settled between the two RiverClan apprentices. Then, finally, Rapidpaw mumbled, "We'll find our way."

"... Okay, sure."

It had, indeed, been five sunrises after the two had left the Colony Of The Blazing Suns. Rapidpaw twitched his ear, and his still–newly–acquired golden accessory glinted in a stray sunbeam, the tiny star–like shape tinkling on it. Charm's gift of good luck to him. Before he could get lost in his thoughts, Shatterpaw piped up once again.

"Maybe we could hunt?" The little apprentice suggested thoughtfully. "I *think* there is a creek nearby, though I can't be sure. … It would be nice if there was one, though! Some carps sound *awesome* right now."

Rapidpaw just grunted absently.

"Okay!" Shatterpaw paused in his tracks. "I'll go fish, then. Though, I know my fishing is not as efficient as yours *but* that doesn't mean that I can't try! Stay here, I'll be back." With that, the black tom dashed off into the trees.

(/) Without a word, Rapidpaw sat down on the cold ground. Here, the leaf–fall winds weren't so bad — the trees shielded the two away from them — however, he still felt cold. Despite Shatterpaw accompanying him, trying his best to be a cheerful support, time dragged by — day by day, night by night, and he didn't wake up beside the she–cat he always wanted to wake up beside. Her gift was a constant reminder of what he had lost, and the memories had turned from rosie to black. Every day, he found it harder and harder to go on without her. When they had parted was only when he had realized how much she had lifted his world to the edges of the sky.

But it's over now. ... The good days are over.

Curling up into a ball and putting his tail over his nose, Rapidpaw let out an airy sigh and just stared into the trees. He wasn't looking at anything in particular — his mind was a blank space, with nothing much going on. He knew that he ought to hunt for survival called, but he also knew that he wouldn't be able to focus and instead would scare all of the prey away. So, he just laid there, waiting for Shatterpaw to come prancing back.

A few moments passed like that, when the bushes to his left suddenly rustled. However, all Rapidpaw did was prick his ears and tilt his head to the direction of the sound.

A flash of grey and white, and Rapidpaw's gaze followed it. Leaves rustled, and he felt his fur prickle as he cautiously stood up to his paws. "Who's there?" He called out, letting hostility highlight his tone with the little will he found himself having.

More rustling, then a grey muzzle peeped out of the undergrowth, soon followed by a fluffy feline body. Grey eyes landed on him, and white spotted fur fluffed up in a seemingly surprise. "Oh! Hi, there. Sorry, I didn't know you were here — did I disturb you from a nap or something … ? You were pretty quiet here, so I am *guessing* that you were napping." The little tom paused before continuing. "Are you with someone orrrr is it just you? Oh! And I'm Blitz, by the way. I thought of that name myself because doesn't it sound so *cool*? Also, who would want to stay *Twinkles*? That's such a silly name! That was my kittypet name, by the way." Blitz paused again as if for a breath. "I don't meet a lotta cats out here, this is so exciting!! What's your name? You look like you would have a pretty cool name."

"... Hi." Rapidpaw paused, narrowing his eyes. This tom seemed innocent, chatty. … *'But not every cat is what he seems, eh?'* Fury's words, when he had last been forced to meet with the Dark Forest tom, rang in his ears. Indeed, and they were true. However, something about the way Blitz blinked at him expectantly, his grey eyes sparkling with excitement, told Rapidpaw of the young tom's sincerity. Finally, he muttered, "The name's Rapidpaw. I have a companion — a black tom — that I'm waiting for, Shatterpaw. So no, I'm not alone." His gaze traveled around the trees, the dullness of the once bright greenery making Blitz's fur almost blend in seamlessly.

"Oooooh." Blitz brightened even more. "Those *are* cool names … ! Anyways, uhhh … if you and Shatterpaw are looking for shelter I have a li'l nook that y'all can borrow— oh! And speaking of Shatterpaw, why isn't he here right now?"

"He's huntin'." Rapidpaw told him. "And it's fine, we don't need *any* shelter." A pause, then, "... Thanks for the offer, though."

"Yeah, of course!" Blitz pranced in a circle for a second before stopping. "Areeeeee you two going somewhere? I *might* know where it is, if y'all need any help!"

Rapidpaw was silent for a second. *We're going to the lake territories. The Clan territories.* What if Blitz was just playing him and already knew, just like Blackout had? What if the rogues had followed the two, and Blitz was a communicator from the Colony Of The Blazing Suns, one who relays information? However, on the other paw, Blitz didn't *look* particularly like a

rogue. He didn't have that underlying savage look in his eyes — in fact, he looked more like a young kit–almost–apprentice than anyone else.

~~*You can trust him.*~~

Rapidpaw only just stopped himself from starting at Fury's voice. He hadn't heard a peep from the Dark Forest tom for days, and Rapidpaw had just assumed that the connection had been served.

~~*Blitz senses that you need help, Rapidpaw. ... Look at the way he's looking at you — that's concern under the cheerful surface. ...*~~

*How do you know **that**?*

~~*Because, with a cat who's as friendly and open as him, it's quite **easy** to tell the **emotions** that he's feeling. ...*~~ Fury reasoned.

... Good point. Rapidpaw admitted begrudgingly. *Maybe I'm just overreacting.*

~~*Good. ... You've finally realized. ...*~~

Rapidpaw, deciding to not comment on Fury's pointed remark, focused back on Blitz, who was still waiting patiently for his response, surprisingly. "Yes, we are going somewhere. … To the lake."

"Which one?"

"The Clan territories."

"*Ooohhhh!!*" Blitz seemed suddenly much more excited than before. "Holy smokes, you two are *Clan cats*?!"

Rapidpaw twitched his ear, a sudden amusement threatening to show on his face. "Yes, we are. Always have been."

"Whoa, that's *awesome*!" Blitz complimented cheerfully. "Well! I can definitely help you two! I know the way to the lake from here — I sometimes hunt near it, but not in your territories. I know how much that land means to y'all." He seemed to grin slightly more, as if that was the funniest joke he had ever told in his whole life. "Anyways! I assume we're going to wait for Shatterpaw or go and find him?"

"We're going to wait." Rapidpaw sighed. "If he's in trouble, he knows to just yowl."

"Okay!" Blitz sat down, curling his poofy tail around his paws. "Then, we wait for the other Clanner."

It took a second for Shatterpaw to come trotting back. However, when he did, he had a trout in his jaws. "Barely managed to catch this!" He puffed, setting them down on the

ground. “They are so slippery! I can *never* understand how everyone can catch them—” Then, he seemed to finally notice Blitz. “... Who’re you?”

“I’m Blitz, and I’m a loner!!” Blitz bounced up to his paws. He stared, wide–eyed at Shatterpaw. “A pleasure to meet you. Rapidpaw told me that you two are Clanners! I thiiiink he also told me that your name would be Shatterpaw!! Is that right, is that right?? That’s a cool name so I figure that would be right! Wow, meeting not just one but *two* Clan cats! In one go! That’s so cool!! Also, I know the way to y’all’s lake and Rapidpaw told me that you guys are heading there!”

Shatterpaw blinked a few times. He glanced at Rapidpaw, a question seeming to stir in those dark green depths of his.

Rapidpaw nodded the slightest of nods. *You can trust him.*

Shatterpaw, nodding back slightly, turned back to Blitz, a friendly smile on his muzzle. “Why, a pleasure to meet you, too! You don’t have a bad name yourself.” The apprentice paused before continuing, as if gathering his words, then he perked up again. “You said that you know the way to our lake?”

“Yeah, I do, I do!!” Blitz bounced on his paws. He pranced forward. “C’mon, I can lead the way! Or wait …” He glanced at the trout that Shatterpaw had brought back, “y’all still needa eat, right? But that’s okay, I can wait!” With that, he sat back down, a cheery grin on his muzzle.

Shatterpaw dipped his head to Blitz, an amused smile playing on his muzzle. "Your help is very much appreciated. No, like seriously, thank you. We were lost out here, haha." Chuckling off the hard truth, Shatterpaw sat down beside Rapidpaw to eat his half of the meal.

Though Rapidpaw was not particularly hungry, he still pulled his half closer to himself. *No use in rejecting food when one has it.*

The first few bites felt like he was forcing down rocks, even though the trout was almost just as fresh as the ones he remembered back at home. However, as he forced himself to eat, he found more and more joy as he was reminded about the taste of home. It was good to eat fish again.

Soon, the fish was only bones. Rapidpaw wanted to stay where he was, to just sleep and relax for a little while, but he forced himself to his paws nevertheless. Stretching his muscles, he let out a soft sigh. The world sure seemed to feel brighter now that he had a full stomach. "Okay. Let's get home."

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"I thiiiink we're halfway there!" Blitz paused on the top of a hill, a wide grin on his muzzle. "I don't really remember the distance *or* day count *but* I do remember that I thought this was half way last time so let's just say that it's half way!!"

"*Only half f*<kin' way?!*" Rapidpaw crouched at the base of the hill, catching his breath. "It's been *seven pairs* of *seven sunrises*! And you are not even *sure*???"

"Yup!" Blitz beamed at him, when his eyes widened with a sudden realization. "Ohhhh *wait*! I *just* remembered something!! So, a little bit away from here there is a *barn*—"

"Wait, hold on a minute!" Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. "Isn't that a twoleg thing?"

"Yeah! But, *hold on,* let me finish!" Blitz blinked eagerly at Shatterpaw as the little tom tipped his head to the side. "That barn has *prey* in it! So many mice and rats and birds it's unbelievable! I think we should go there! C'mon!!" With that, Blitz lifted his tail and started to prance away.

"Wait, Blitz—"

"No time to wasteee!!" Blitz gave a little bounce, but never slowed his pace.

Rapidpaw let out a sharp breath through his nose. "Well, c'mon, Shatterpaw. We can't lose our … hyperactive … guide now." So, with a low grumble, he reluctantly followed the grey and white tom.

Why do I feel like this won't end well?

Chapter XIII →

`` ***Surrender***

"Okay, this is it!" Blitz was peering over the hill, his grey eyes sparkling.

Rapidpaw lifted his nose and scented the air before wrinkling his muzzle. "It f*<kin' *reeks* of twolegs even from here."

"And … dogs?" Shatterpaw pinned back his ears at his own guess.

"And *mice*!" Blitz added cheerfully. "C'mon! It's gonna be a *feast*!" With that, the young tom sprang to his paws and dashed downhill towards the barn.

Rapidpaw suddenly felt worried. "Wait, Blitz! Shouldn't we—"

"Yeah, let's *go*!" Shatterpaw dashed after the grey and white tom, seemingly completely forgetting about the warning scent of canines. "C'mon, Rapidpaw! How long has it been since we've had a *proper* set of meals??" The little tom didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he made more of an effort to catch up to Blitz.

Rapidpaw let out a low grumble of frustration. “Okay, sure, let’s just charge into a badger’s den over a couple o’ f*<kin’ mice. Wouldn’t that be awesome?” However, he followed anyway, if only at a much slower pace.

By the time he caught up with them, the two had caught two mice already. Shatterpaw was already munching on one while Blitz was still sniffing around the hay. Rapidpaw had never seen the kit so concentrated before.

Rapidpaw paused at the tall double–doors and parted his jaws to scent the air. His gaze narrowed. Was it just him, or was the twoleg scent particularly strong here? And was that some other cat scent other than his little group?

“Rapidpaw, there you are!” Shatterpaw had lifted his head, and his green eyes brightened. “I was beginning to think that you went to hunt someplace else. C’mon, enjoy these mice that Blitz caught. They are *awesome*! He’s a really good hunter, y’know!”

Rapidpaw scanned the area cautiously, not moving from his spot. “I have a bad feeling ‘bout this. We really shouldn’t—”

“Oh, c’mon, no way is *Rapidpaw* worrying now, eh? Of all cats!” Shatterpaw’s gaze glinted teasingly. “Pretty unexpected, don’t you think?”

You have no idea. Rapidpaw huffed out a breath through his nose. “Alright, alright, I’m comin’.”

Though he wasn't particularly hungry, Rapidpaw still sat down beside the other apprentice and started to nibble on his mouse. The taste was musty, a lot like the forest prey that he was beginning to be used to. The rodent was small, so he was soon finished before he stood up and stretched. Forcing a tinge of authority into his voice, he asserted, "Okay. Now, we need to get movin'. Blitz!" He searched the hay stacks as he called for their guide. "Blitz, c'mon, let's go, you can carry your prey with you and eat it later."

"Awe, c'mon, Rapidpaw!" Shatterpaw complained from his spot. "There's so much prey, and we just got here!"

"No! We need to go, *now*." Rapidpaw left no room for questions. He had a bad feeling about this place. "C'mon, Shatterpaw, just pick up your prey and let's—"

"*No one* is going *nowhere*!"

Rapidpaw jumped and whipped around with a hiss. A new cat was standing at the entrance, head high. Stepping in front of Shatterpaw to protect the younger of the two, Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes at the newcomer. "We can go wherever we *want*, ***@$shole***."

The newcomer, a brown mackerel tabby, arched a brow at him. He flicked his tail, and two more cats fanned out at his flanks. "I don't think so. This is *my* territory, and no one wanders in and gets away with it!"

One of the cats, a bright ginger tom, blinked worried blue eyes at the leader. “Storm, don’t you think that this is—”

“Shut it, Quiver!” Storm snarled. “We need to protect our territory!” He whipped a stormy blue gaze to the next cat, a fluffy dark red tabby with bright green eyes.

However, the only thing that she did was yawn, not looking exactly supportive but rather bored. “Right, right. … Yeah.”

Storm scoffed. “Nice.” Turning back to Rapidpaw, he snarled. “Now get off my territory before I have to show my claws!”

“It’s not just *your* territory, y’know.” The dark tabby pointed out mildly.

“Shut it, Comet!” Storm hissed. “I’m doing the talking here.”

“Why don’t *you* shut it for once?” Comet muttered back.

However, Storm didn’t seem to hear or pay any attention to her. Instead, he bared his teeth. “Now, hunt us two mice *outside* this barn to make up for your theft and bring them to me, or you risk my wrath!”

Rapidpaw twitched his ears skeptically. “Your group doesn’t seem to be so supportive.” He observed mildly, privately enjoying the sight of how stupid the tom was looking.

Storm snorted. "I don't need *them*! They can be as unsupportive as they want!"

"Really?" Comet called, pausing in her washing.

"So, outsider?" Storm snarled, ignoring the tabby she–cat. "What will it be? Payment of the debt, or will a fight teach you a lesson?"

"A *fight*?" Rapidpaw was shocked. Did this little tom think he could actually beat him in a fight? Storm's belly was rounder than a bowling ball. Surely arrogance was the only reason for the challenge? "You're no more than a f*<kin' kittypet!"

"You wanna test that?" Storm snarled, arching his back.

*That's what **I** said to Fury.* Rapidpaw suddenly became aware of the scar over his left eye, blurring the vision there. *And I lost that terribly because of my pride.* No matter how much his claws itched for action, no matter how his fur tingled uncomfortably at the thought, Rapidpaw needed to be patient with this tom — he wasn't malicious, after all. "Look, Storm, there is no need for—"

"What?" Storm's eyes glinted mockingly. "Too chicken? I never thought a *wildcat* would be the one not fit for battle! Well, I guess there is a first for everything, eh? Or, by the scent … a rogue cat specifically."

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. *Have I really spent so long with the Colony that my RiverClan scent has vanished completely?* He felt his fur rise uncomfortably at the thought. However, he still

lifted his muzzle. "*I ain't no* ***rogue*** *cat*! I'm a warrior from RiverClan!" He was *not* about to tell this barn cat about his situation.

"A *warrior* and *Clan cat*! Ha!" Storm drew his head back in a cackle as if that was the funniest thing he had heard in his entire life. "It seems that you've not been trained enough, 'cuz I've seen better 'warriors' than *you*, even if not with your fancy *Clan blood*."

"I don't need to prove *anythin'* to you!" Rapidpaw growled, pinning back his ears.

"Oh, but you doooo, because that sounds a *lot* like ***insecurityyyy*** to meeee!" Storm observed in a sing–song voice.

"It's not *insecurity*, it's *annoyance*." Rapidpaw spat defiantly.

"Yeah?" Storm waved a font paw at himself. "Come at me, then, eh?"

"Rapidpaw, I don't think this is smart." Shatterpaw advised softly.

"I've got this." Rapidpaw assured his friend. "Go get Blitz and go back from where we came from. I'll be there in a second."

"But, Rapidpaw—"

"Just go!"

Shatterpaw hesitated before nodding and slowly making his way to the hay where Blitz had last vanished.

"C'mon, Clanner!" Storm taunted. "Surely a little scruffle won't do much to your ego?"

"*My* ego?" Rapidpaw took a step forward to the brown tabby. "*You're* talking about ego now?"

Storm took a step forward as well, having the most egotistical look on his muzzle. "Yes. Yes I *am*."

Rapidpaw bounded forward until he was nearly muzzle to muzzle with Storm. "Say that to my *face* then, *b!*ch.*"

"If you're so incompetent that you need repeating, then I shall oblige." Storm sneered.

Rapidpaw growled. How did this cat know how to hit his nerves exactly right? "I'm not takin' this *nonsense* anymore." Then, without warning, he dodged around Storm and started racing for the barn exit.

"***Comet***!" Storm howled. "*Stop him*!"

A screech erupted from behind Rapidpaw, and suddenly he was rolling head over heels before being pinned with his belly to the ground. He spat and struggled before kicking out with his hind leg. A curse came from above and he rolled to the side just in time before his attacker toppled to the ground. Whipping around to bare his teeth at his opponent, his

whiskers twitched in surprise to find that, indeed, Comet had been his aggressor. She–cat or not, he needed to defend himself and get back to Blitz and Shatterpaw. Besides, Comet wasn't finished.

"One more step and you're crow–food!" She growled, puffing up her fur to look twice her already large size.

"I've seen worse than you." Rapidpaw snarled back, baring his teeth.

"Yeah? Did that 'worse' give you that scar of yours? Because that looks like a battle lost!"

"It was a battle *won*." Lying through his teeth, he literally was, but he wasn't about to admit defeat to an enemy.

"Let's see about that!" Comet bared her teeth as well. "Because what *I* scent … is a lie!"

Rapidpaw flinched slightly. Was he *that* transparent? Did *all* his feelings show as clearly as that? No time to worry about it, however, because Comet was already springing towards him once again.

Rapidpaw crouched, planning to dash away at the last second and to score in a kick to her flank, but he proved too slow from days of no rest. In a flash, Comet pinned him down onto his belly and immobilized his hind legs.

"Don't take me as a fool." the she–cat hissed from above him. "I can smell your fear."

"I'm not scared of you!" Rapidpaw snarled. "A buncha loners? No problem!" He tried to buck to throw Comet off, but his bluff was soon revealed plain as day as Comet didn't even budge.

The dark she–cat snorted. "Sure, no problem." Suddenly, she took him by the scruff and harshly dropped him at Storm's paws.

All the breath had suddenly left his lungs. For a second, he couldn't move any muscle, and he just lay there on his stomach, stunned. Surprise, though dull, was there. *How in the unholy* ***f**<k*** *are they beating me?!*

"You think you're smart, don't you?" Storm sneered. "Nobody has escaped me before, what makes you think you'll be the first?"

"Because …" Rapidpaw huffed when he found his breath back, "there is always a first, ain't there?" He flinched as the ivory thorns–for–claws dug into his shoulders.

"And that's where you're wrong, *kit*." Storm gibed. "Here, there is no *first*, but only a last—"

"I'm not a kit!"

"What are you, then?"

"A warrior!"

"Doubt it."

"I'll claw your ears off your *dumb@$s* ***scalp***! Let's see how you doubt it then!"

Storm's ears pinned back, and he bared his teeth in a snarl. Clearly, he was about to say something back when he cut himself off. He pricked his ears when suddenly his stormy blue eyes widened with horror. "Scatter!"

And then, they were gone.

Rapidpaw slowly heaved himself to his paws, rubbing the back of his neck where Comet had yanked his scruff. Blinking a few times, he scanned the enclosure. "... Well!" He shook out his fur. "That's that, I guess." Now, he could peacefully find Shatterpaw and Blitz. What had spooked the three, though?

Then, he saw it.

Well, more heard than saw, at least.

Barking, then a high pitch squeal erupted from behind him. The sound of many paws thumping the ground all at once thundered. Peculiar scents suddenly rioted around him, and he pinned his ears back. Curiosity got the better of him, and he slowly stalked over the barn's exit and peaked out.

Nothing.

Then, more squealing and barking. Whipping his gaze towards the sounds, his tail bushed in alarm. Was this what Storm and his crew were afraid of?

Three pairs of twolegs and three pairs of dogs. The twolegs all looked female, and they were the source of the squealing and thundering pawsteps. They were running around the small clearing just outside the barn, but they weren't what he was looking at.

He was looking at the dogs … because they were loose.

Their leashes dragged on the ground, their noses pointed downwards. Movements — slow, purposeful. Their eyes — watchful.

What are they doing? However, he had heard the stories. He had heard of these large, brutish creatures that would track down anything just to kill it. He shivered. What were they tracking now? But then, the lead snapped his head up, and yellow eyes landed right onto pale blue. A throaty sound erupted from deep in its stomach, paired by two more in rapid succession. The other two snapped their heads up as well, and yips pierced his ears, the source being the open jaws of the younger two.

They charged.

Quickly regaining his senses, Rapidpaw stole to the side at the last minute. However, when he rolled back onto his paws, something thwacked him on the back of the head with the

force of a great tree crashing down. Then, claws sent an arch of pain through his shoulders. He lashed out with his back legs, and a howl split the air and he turned to see the lead dog reeling. A cry of rage split the air, and he was on the ground again, this time with Storm pinning him down.

"You were supposed to get your head bit off!" The brown tabby snarled.

"Oh, sorry," Rapidpaw spat sarcastically, "I didn't get to hear your script!" Then, with a sharp twist, he launched himself forward and struck the other's nose with his head. As Storm reared and howled out a nasty curse, Rapidpaw charged and leaped, pinning the other down. "*You shoulda let me leave in **peace***." He snarled. He unsheathed his claws and let the jagged edges glint in the sun in front of his attacker's eyes, as though about to strike. Privately, he relished the fear that glinted in Storm's eyes, however, the older apprentice quickly hopped off him and dashing away.

"H–hey!" Storm stuttered. "Get back here … !"

But Rapidpaw ignored him and made way towards the hill that he, Shatterpaw, and Blitz were last alone on.

As soon as he made his way to the base of the hill, Shatterpaw and Blitz peaked out from a patch of foliage. "Yeahhhh, that was so *cool*!!" Shatterpaw squealed, bouncing up and nudging Rapidpaw joyfully, the latter ignoring the jolt of pain that shocked through his sore muscles at the gesture. "You *really* showed them! Right, Blitz??"

Blitz didn't reply, however. His grey eyes were distant, with a worried glint to them as the sun filtered through the dark colors.

"*Right*, Blitz?" Shatterpaw repeated, a little louder this time.

"Huh—?" Blitz snapped his gaze towards him. "Oh, right—! That was *epic*, Rapidpaw!"

"This is flattering and all," Rapidpaw grunted, trying to ignore the heat of embarrassment that was beginning to gather in his cheeks, "but can we get moving now?"

"Y–yeah, right." Blitz shook himself out. "Let's go."

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Blitz led the way once again. This time, however, he was more quiet, but Rapidpaw wasn't worrying about that too much. If one would ask him, he actually appreciated the quiet. He had other things on his mind.

Great stars, no one will make me a warrior like this! I gotta get myself together — I nearly got myself killed back there! Storm's plan had nearly worked. If he hadn't dashed away in time, he would have been crow–food by now.

I have to get over her. His preoccupated state had hindered his ability to think straight, not to mention his sheer *exhaustion*.

'Get over' was harder said, and even harder done, though.

*How — but **how** — will I 'get over her'? She was so kind and—*

~~*Because it's **over**, Rapidpaw.*~~

No, it's not! We'll see each other again someday and we'll be together again — you'll f<kin' see, Fury!*

~~*Rapidpaw. ...*~~ Fury seemed to sigh. ~~*I admire your persistence, but this is something you cannot change. ... You have to learn to surrender, and to say goodbye, or her letting you go will be futile.*~~

... Surrender? Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. The word was something he hadn't thought of before, and it was alien to his language. He hated the idea of ever even thinking about the word becoming a part of his dictionary. *Fury ... but I can't! I **can't** surrender.*

~~*But you **have** to.*~~

I don't have to do anythin'!

Silence.

Rapidpaw tilted his head to the sky — an unfairly cheerful blue. He imagined it dark for a second, the stars covering one horizon to another in one sweep of glory. Anger welled up

inside him. He found himself narrowing his eyes before facing forward, making an effort to catch up with his companions once again.

No. No, he would *not* give in if he could help it.

Deep down, however, he knew that Fury was right, and this was out of his control. He was so close, yet so far from his end goal.

I just hope that I'll become a warrior this time, like what I've been workin' for.

Maybe then things could be okay once again.

Chapter XIV →

`` ***Home Sweet Home***

"Oooookay! Well, that was a blast!" Blitz stopped in his tracks. He wrinkled his nose. "I'm *pretty* sure that is your lake right over …" he pointed a paw in front of himself at a body of water sparkling on the horizon, "there." He blinked at Rapidpaw. "Right, right? Am I right??"

Rapidpaw halted. For a moment, he was silent. It was easy to pick out WindClan's moors; ShadowClan's, SkyClan's, and ThunderClan's forests, along with the one and only RiverClan's giant, sparkling river. Oh, yeah, this was the lake. He could already see his Clanmates going about their business in his head.

Were they *really* going about their business, though? *Was I even missed… at all?*

Immediately, he dismissed the thought. *Don't be like that.* He curled his tail and set his jaw. *Of course I was missed.* To Blitz, he nodded. "Yes … that's our lake."

"So I *did* remember! How *awesome!!*" Blitz bounced on his paws in his excitement. Then, much to Rapidpaw's surprise, he nudged him playfully. "Well, I guess this is when we part ways once again. Good luck to y'all on whatever y'all're gonna do!! I hope that we meet again!!" Then, lifting his tail straight up into the air, he pranced off, humming happily to himself.

Rapidpaw blinked after Blitz, processing all the hyperactive tom had said before exchanging a glance with Shatterpaw. "Welp." He concluded. "You ready to go home?"

"You wouldn't *believe*." Shatterpaw answered fervently.

And so, with Rapidpaw leading the way once again, they made their way back the way they had come so many sunrises ago.

RiverClan, I'm coming home. And I better be made a warrior as soon as I step paw in that camp!

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No matter his time away, he would never forget his way through his beloved territory.

He marched straight for camp, not stopping to hunt or gaze around. He realized that his nose had begun to get unaccustomed to the strong scent of his home territories. Suddenly, the fresh, cool scent of water and the appetizing smell of fish started to wreath around him, strong as the first time he had scented rouge. Soon, it got stronger and stronger as he neared the heart of his territory, and he couldn't help but pick up his pace. Had his Clanmates missed him? However, he slowed his pace again when he neared the barrier. It felt … strange to return after so long. Then, he took a deep breath and lifted his muzzle. *No need to fret. It's just RiverClan —* ***your Clan****.* So, putting on a proud stance, he strutted in.

Immediately, gazes snapped towards his direction. Ears pricked. There was a single voice — it seemed to be much younger than himself — yowled out "Rogue!" but no one reacted. They just *stared.*

"*Rapidpaw?*" Mockingstar's green gaze was wide as he stared at the apprentice from the meeting rock. "You— what??"

A little ginger and white face peaked out of the nursery, her muzzle wrinkled at him. "Isn't he the dude we just sat vigil for?" She asked loudly.

"Pigmentkit!" Another she–cat, Morningdawn, grabbed her kit by the scruff and put her back into the nursery. "Not so loud!"

"What?!" Came Pigmentkit's indignant voice. "I can say whatever—" However, her mother's shushing cut her off.

"There was a whole *vigil?*" Rapidpaw's fur spiked. Had he really been gone for that long?

"Out! Everybody, out of my way!" A familiar voice yowled across the clearing, barking out the order to the gathering crowd. When the cats slowly started to jumble out of the way, the order came once again, sharper this time. "*Move!*" The crowd finally parted to reveal the familiar brown fur of his mentor, Fringeflight. The deputy's green gaze rounded in shock. "By StarClan, it *is* you! Where in all the *lake* have you *been?*!" Then, despite the aggressiveness of the demands, Fringeflight nuzzled him, a soft sigh of relief coming from him. "You had me *fretting* like a fox with its head cut off!"

Rapidpaw booped his nose to Fringeflight's. He didn't know it, but a small smile had formed on his muzzle. It was good to see his mentor. "I've missed you too, Fringeflight."

"I can't believe you're back. You've grown!" Fringeflight's gaze looked him up and down, eyes lingering on Rapidpaw's scar for a second before looking into his eyes. "Okay, we're going to get you to the medicine den and you're going to rest. After you do, you *better* tell me what happened! Understood?"

"No, no. There's no need. Seriously—"

“Shatterpaw!!” Willowfern sprang out of the crowd. She dodged around Rapidpaw and Fringeflight and nuzzled Shatterpaw, licking him over the ears like a worried mother. “Great stars above, I was worried sick!”

“Willowfern!” Shatterpaw nuzzled her back, just as affectionately. “I missed you so much! But there was no need to—”

“RiverClan!” Mockingstar’s voice, though soft, still cut through the commotion with a commanding tone. “Settle down!”

It took a little, but soon the murmuring died down and the Clan gathered once again around the meeting rock.

“Good.” Mockingstar seemed to sigh before continuing. “I am very, very pleased to see that the two missing apprentices are back home. I’m glad that StarClan hasn't claimed either of you.” He nodded to Rapidpaw and Shatterpaw in turn, his eyes lingering on Rapidpaw’s scar as well before he continued. “However, wherever they were, they must have had quite the journey. So, no one will bother them except for Goldleaf and the cats closest to either of them. Is this order understood?”

There were murmurs of consent from the crowd.

“Good.” Mockingstar repeated, seemingly satisfied. He leaped off the meeting rock. “Meeting dismissed, then.”

Rapidpaw watched him go, his gaze narrowed. *That's it? Meeting dismissed?* "Mockingstar!" He was about to dash after his leader when his peripheral vision caught a flash of black speckled with white. There seemed to be a soft, feathery brush of fur against his side. He napped his gaze in the direction of it, but there was no one. *What in the f*<kin' name of the lake was that?*

Fringeflight tipped his head to the side. The deputy blinked slowly, and his questioning gaze turned to sympathy. "C'mon." He gently nudged him towards the medicine den. "This is for your own good."

"But my f*<kin' *ceremony*!" Rapidpaw protested loudly as he was ushered along. "There're rogues. They're planning somethin'! Surely—"

Fringeflight's gaze sharpened. "'Rogues'?"

Rapidpaw felt his heart soar. "Yes, rogues. Their group is called the Colony Of The Blazing Suns, and—"

For a second, Fringeflight's gaze looked troubled, before the shadow passed as soon as it had appeared. "You can tell me *after* you've rested." He ordered, his tone more brisk now.

"But that's *vital* information." Rapidpaw urged. *For f*<k's sakes.* "So I should get my warrior name, even if it's *after* I've rested!"

Fringeflight let out a soft sigh, seemingly in resignation. Softly, he murmured, "I would have given it to you by now, trust me. But I'm not the one making the rules here."

Rapidpaw gritted his teeth. "Yeah. Mockingstar does."

"And he believes that StarClan truly wants you to be the next medicine cat." Fringeflight's gaze flicked to him momentarily before he wrapped his tail over Rapidpaw's shoulders. "C'mon. We did all we could."

"Did we, though?" Rapidpaw countered sharply. He flicked his tail. "Did we really do all we could?"

Fringeflight opened his jaws to respond, his green eyes troubled. Suddenly, though, he was cut off by a sharp cry coming from the camp's entrance.

"Fringeflight!" Silverbrook marched into camp. His stormy blue eyes landed on Rapidpaw, and he paused in his tracks. He narrowed his eyes. Then, he didn't even blink as recognition sparked in his gaze. He just grunted and turned his attention back to Fringeflight.

Rapidpaw forced himself not to flinch at his best friend's dismissiveness. Surely Silverbrook was just grumpy at the moment?

"I found a trespasser on our territory!" The silver tom continued, his chest puffed out. "And she wants to talk to you."

"Well, bring her, then." Fringeflight ordered, his tail stiffening.

Silverbrook stepped to the side, and a beautiful she–cat with blue eyes stepped into camp, her chin high. "I'm looking for someone."

Rapidpaw's breath caught in his throat, and suddenly he forgot all about his ceremony. He knew those eyes, those patterns, that voice. He knew that face, like the back of his paw.

Could it really be? It had to be—

"*Charm?!*"

Chapter XV →

`` ***One Thousand Chances***

Charm's gaze snapped over to his voice and her eyes lit up. "Rapidpaw!"

"Charm!" Rapidpaw felt his heart soar. His paws carried him to her with a lightness he had never felt. Soon, he was nuzzling her and purring loudly. "You came!"

She returned the favor, licking him lovingly around the ears. “Of course I did, my love.”

Then, an indigent voice cut through their joyful reunion. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Whoa! Hold up, slow down — who’s this? What’s going on?”

Rapidpaw turned to see Silverbrook glaring at the two of them. Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes slightly. What was *his* problem? Shrugging, he decided to ignore it for the moment and turned to face his Clan, shoulder to shoulder with Charm. “RiverClan, this is Charm.” He smiled at her fondly. “She helped me while I was away.”

The Clan stared. Mockingstar blinked, as if shocked by the sudden turn of events. Fringeflight, however, stepped forward, his green gaze cool but understanding. “We can allow her to stay if she so pleases, then. However, Rapidpaw, just because you … know her … it doesn’t mean that she won’t have to prove her place here.”

“‘I’ll prove myself. I’ll stay loyal.” Charm declared before Rapidpaw could react. “I wish to join Rapidpaw in RiverClan.”

Fringeflight nodded. “Then, it is settled. Welcome to RiverClan. I will choose your mentor by sunhigh.”

Charm’s tail curled into the air. “Thank you …” She trailed off slightly mid–sentence, tilting her head questioningly at him.

"Fringeflight." Fringeflight answered, his voice a tad bit softer now.

Charm dipped her head. "Thank you, Fringeflight."

Fringeflight flicked his tail in acknowledgement before turning back to his Clan. "Meeting dismissed, now. Go back to your duties."

As the Clan shuffled away and back to their daily tasks, Rapidpaw felt that he could as well have leapt with joy. He nuzzled Charm and curled his tail around hers. "I'm so glad you came."

Charm smiled, leaning into him slightly. "I'm glad I came, too."

Rapidpaw returned the smile. He wouldn't hide his affection for her — not any more. He just simply couldn't. *It feels too real to ignore.* "C'mon, I'll show ya around!"

As he led her towards the fresh–kill pile, not saving the best for last, his peripheral vision caught sight of someone and he turned to see Silverbrook stalking off, tail low and lashing.

Someone sure ate his fresh–kill. Rapidpaw furrowed his brow, though. What was up with his friend? *I'll have to check up on him soon. Hopefully it's nothing too–too bad.*

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"Okay." Goldleaf nudged a leaf closer to Rapidpaw's muzzle for the tenth time. "Scent this herb, and tell me what it is." Her voice was soft, but that hint of irritation in her greenish–blue eyes was becoming more apparent now.

Rapidpaw forced himself not to recoil at the harsh scent. Tentatively, he sniffed at it, his muzzle wrinkled. "Uhm … dock?"

"No." Goldleaf flicked her tail slightly. "*Yarrow*. See those spots and those ridged edges? Smell that strong scent?" She pointed out the details as she named them. "That's the features of *yarrow*. Dock, on the other hand, is smooth and unicolored, with little–to–no scent."

"Uhu." Rapidpaw tried to soak in the information, but his mind couldn't get past the strong, pungent *scent* of the herb, and how much he *didn't* want to learn about herbs.

Goldleaf sighed softly. "Okay. Let's pick an even easier one, then." She stuck some sweet–smelling leaves under his muzzle. "What herb is this?"

Rapidpaw scented it, and his tail curled at the strength of the scent. *Great stars, how do medicine cats do this?* He suppressed the urge to snatch and chew, its scent was so sweet. "Uuuuh. …" He searched his memory for when Goldleaf told him about this leaf. But he was distracted. "... Sweetmint?"

"Close." Goldleaf's eyes were still irritated though. "But no. It's *catmint*. Remember? Its sweet scent and soft leaves are its signature. It is used to cure greencough and sometimes whitecough."

"Right, right. …" Rapidpaw muttered, but in reality, he knew that he could *not* remember any of that for anything.

Goldleaf blinked at him. Her green gaze looked slightly troubled under the irritation. "The Half Moon Meeting is soon, Rapidpaw. You *have* to know *something* by the time it happens."

Alarm sharpened Rapidpaw's gaze. "*What??* Like, *how soon*?" It had been only a few sunrises since he had been deemed well enough to start his training with Goldleaf. No way was the Meeting *so soon.*

"In three sunrises."

"*Three* ***sunrises?!***" Rapidpaw suddenly felt the rock in his stomach enlarge. Dread sent adrenaline through his veins. He felt his claws prick the earth.

Goldleaf's gaze shimmered with sympathy. She gently laid her tail on his front paws as an attempted gesture of comfort. "It's okay. You'll do great."

Rapidpaw grunted, however, he felt like *clawing* at something. He had been *close* — so *close* — to becoming a warrior, and now he was going to be a *medicine cat?*

"It's StarClan's will." Mockingstar had tried to explain to him a few sunrises before. "They gave me a message about you. … They told me that you are destined to be the next medicine cat."

Fury, however, had thought otherwise. The Dark Forest tom had flicked his tail, his lips curled disdainfully. "'Destined to be the next medicine cat', they say." He had sneered, seemingly just as ticked as Rapidpaw. He had turned back to the apprentice, shaking his head. "They have no sight, Rapidpaw. But *you* … you have heart. You have *drive*. Don't lose that. You know the truth. Part of it, at least. It *will* come out, however. I promise you."

Rapidpaw had known what Fury had meant by 'the truth'. He had meant that Fallenstar had manipulated the events. He had directly influenced Mockingstar's judgement, feeding off the fact that the leader had very strong faith in his warrior ancestors due to his aging.

And now, I'm helpless to stop him.

Rapidpaw gritted his teeth.

Stupid f<kin' StarClan prophecies!*

~~*Calm, don't curse your ancestors just yet.*~~

I'll curse whoever I want to!

~~*It'll be okay.*~~ Fury soothed, his voice gentle for once. ~~*All will come in time. … I* ***promised*** *you, after all.*~~

Rapidpaw stayed silent for a moment. His tail flicked once. *Yes, you did.*

~~*And do I ever dishonor my promises?*~~

No, you don't, I guess.

~~*It's good that you know. ... Be at peace. ... All will come in time.*~~

In time. Rapidpaw closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *So much time has passed. How much more do I need?*

~~*Not much.*~~ Fury appeased. ~~*Just trust me. Trust ... and all will come to you. Just remember ... remember what loyalty truly is, and all will come in time. ...*~~

What does loyalty have to do with anything?

~~*And please. ...*~~ Fury continued instead of answering. ~~*Please, Rapidpaw ... be careful.*~~

What do you mean?

But Fury was silent once again, and somehow, that was ominous.

Suddenly, Rapidpaw had a sickening feeling in his stomach. *Was that ... a* ***warning****?*

Chapter XVI →

`` ***Reckoning***

The trees were towers overhead, arching over the spoiled ground as they clinged to life that it may still hold. The fog was thick and suffocating, dragging the meager light out of the darkness below.

Once, the bleakness — the *hopelessness* — had spooked Rapidpaw. Now, however, he didn't even bat an eye when he found himself waking in darkness. He scanned his surroundings, the bioluminescent fungi shedding just enough light for him to see his paws. When his vision had adjusted, he flicked his tail. "Fury?" He called out, voice flat, figuring that the former Colony cat was the reason why his night was forced sleepless once again.

A flash of white. Then, the red–eyed rogue slipped from the shadows. His gaze was hard like usual, but in them wasn't the glint that screamed training night anymore. They had long lost it, the intention buried and gone. "Rapidpaw." Fury's gaze was intense. "You have to listen."

"My ears are open, then." Rapidpaw answered lightly, neatly curling his fluffy tail around his tabbied paws.

"Do you remember what I told you? About StarClan?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I need to warn you." Fury's tail started flicking back and forth. A pause, then, "There will be a battle, Rapidpaw. Fallenstar will interfere — he already has. You know how Mockingstar's sick?"

Rapidpaw nodded. "Of course I know." He answered, a little bitterly. He had been seething that Mockingstar had ignored how he had found rogues ready to attack the Clans and had apprenticed him to a medicine cat instead. And now that the leader was in the medicine

den, he monitored Rapidpaw's every move if by overseeing him Rapidpaw would actually learn herbs and not space out. Thankfully, however, Mockingstar just mainly slept now, resting away the sickness plaguing his body.

"I said *listen.*" Fury's voice snapped him back to the present. He flicked his tail. "That was Fallenstar making his first move."

"*What*? StarClan cats can make the living *sick* now?"

"Always have. Now let me *finish*." Fury narrowed his eyes. "I heard that he'll now *physically interfere* in order to falsely reassure your Clan that they are making the right choice in making you a medicine cat."

"How do you know this?"

"Sparksnap told me."

"The she–cat guarding the barrier?" Rapidpaw's eyes widened in disbelief.

Fury nodded. "Yes, her. We were … *friends* … when she was still here."

"But are you still?"

"She thinks we are." Fury answered simply. "And that is all we need to trust her."

Rapidpaw nodded slowly. *If Fury trusts her, then I do too.* He opened his jaws to say something more, when suddenly Fury stiffened. His nose snapped to the air, and he bristled. "You should go."

"Why—"

"Just *do it*."

Rapidpaw regarded the other tom for a moment. Fury started to walk away. Shrugging, Rapidpaw closed his eyes as he had done countless times before. A moment passed, then, "Be careful, Rapidpaw. You don't know where you're headed."

Then, the Dark forest vanished, and an outcry jolted him back to the waking world.

"*Mockingstar! Fringeflight!!* Come quickly!"

Rapidpaw's head snapped up. Goldleaf had been on her way to him, but the panicked screech had caused her to swerve away from her original course and squeeze out of the medicine den. Rapidpaw followed her movements, squinting up at the clear sky above.

Half moon.

The meeting was tonight.

A lump formed in his throat, but he swallowed it back. *StarClan, help me, I don't want to be a medicine cat!* He *couldn't* be a medicine cat. He had *promised* to be a *warrior*.

Low grumbles that followed the outcry snapped him back to reality. Mockingstar slipped out from behind him, blinking sleep away from his bleary green eyes. "What's the racket about?"

"Rogues." The head of the night patrol, Fallowpounce, puffed out. Her flanks oscillated as she struggled to catch her breath, seemingly having sprinted from the border to camp. "Rogues at the border. And lots of them!"

The other two cats, Shelltooth and Blackstorm, nodded fervently in agreement, too winded to add any more than so.

Mockingstar blinked once. He opened and closed his jaws, seemingly lost for words. Finally thinking of something to say, he opened his jaws once again, but Goldleaf was already ushering him back inside the medicine den, murmuring something about sickness and rest.

Fallowpounce's green eyes flashed with alarm. She and Shelltooth exchanged a glance. Shelltooth shook her head, her bristly tail low to the ground. Blackstorm's tail tip curled in distress. The rest of RiverClan murmured uneasily.

Rapidpaw pinpointed the alarmed face of Charm as she regarded her mentor's patrol. Then, she turned to face him,and he knew that their thoughts were alike.

Blackout.

Then, a young voice sounded above the murmurs, something small and frightened like that of a kit's. "Are we getting *attacked*?"

And that was all it took.

"Rogues are *attacking us*??"

"Mockingstar's *sick*! How are we supposed to *fight without him*??"

"*We're going to get* ***swamped***!!"

Rapidpaw searched the clearing to see Fringeflight at the center, trying to calm them down but failing spectacularly. The deputy weaved around the yowling warriors and apprentices, trying hard to reassure them, but his words might as well have been never uttered.

"We're being attacked! *How in StarClan are we fine?!*"

Rapidpaw pinned back his ears, frustration boiling up inside him.

"StarClan, *save* us!"

His *Clan* was *panicking* like a bunch of *blackbirds* surrounded by *hunters* — and *somehow* they expected to *fight?*

"***We're all going to die***!!"

"*Enough!*" He didn't even notice that he had made his way to the base of the Highstump.

But the yowls persisted.

Rapidpaw flicked his tail, something sharp and agitated. He took a deep breath, then leaped onto Highstump to address the Clan directly and yowled with all his might —

"***Enough***! *I said* ***enough***!"

Every head snapped towards him, gazes mixed between confused, alarmed, panicked, and enraged. Shock had sent silence sailing across the crowd, letting the panic fall to a deafening silence as all looked up to him.

Rapidpaw swept his gaze over the crowd. "By the f*<kin' lake that we live by! Y'all run 'round here, screamin' and wailin' 'bout death and destruction as though it would prevent it! Don't you *see*? Yer panic — *each* of yer panic — will do nothin' but serve 'em. Your *panic*" – he narrowed his eyes – "only *spread* like a *f*<king* ***disease***! And just like a disease, it will be the fall of us all."

Fringeflight, still in the middle of the crowd, opened his jaws to speak — but then, he snapped them shut, watching Rapidpaw with something between disbelief and hope. The deputy nodded vigorously to his apprentice when blue met green, silently urging him on.

"But how will we protect our leader?" Morningdawn called to Rapidpaw from somewhere beside the nursery. "Also, who are *you* to stand on Highstump like that?? You're not our leader! You're not even a full medicine cat!"

"I'm standing here," Rapidpaw informed her slowly, deliberately, "so that y'all would *listen* to what I have to *say*. It doesn't take a 'full medicine cat' to *understand* how winning battles become *lost*."

Now he had their attention. Every cat was blinking up at him, watching with an interested glimmer in their eyes.

It's now or never. "Whether it's one or five–f*<kin'–thousand rogues attackin' us, we're *not* curling up and dyin', understood?" He hissed lowly, firmly, his voice cutting through the cold like claws through mist. "We'll stand like the river's edge — no matter how many stones're hurled at us."

"What do we *live* by? What're we named after? That's right — our home: *river.* You think our waters always flowed this easy? ***No***!" A few cats flinched at the sudden force in his voice, but their gazes didn't wander. "They *fought* for *every* twist and turn."

A few exchanged quick glances, their gazes conflicted.

"There was a time," he continued, his tone softening, "when they had to carve their ways through the earth, bit by bit, an' grind their way to greatness. We, as a Clan, are in that stage

right now. And these rogues? They're just driftwood caught in our current. We'll break 'em, or we'll carry 'em out! Understand?"

Every gaze was glued onto him now. Even Pigmentkit peeked out from the nursery, eyes wide, ears perked — as if she were committing all she heard to memory — perhaps, she was. A few twitched their ears, and Fringeflight's forest green eyes were shining.

Rapidpaw pushed on, taking a step forward on Highstump. "One or all of y'all might be askin': who am *I* to be talkin' this? Well, let me tell ya: you're hearin' this 'cause I still got *hope*."

Thaaaat was kind of a stretch. But they needed it, and he would say it if only for them. "'Cause I ain't givin' up for ***nothin***'! And I don't — *shouldn't* — think y'all will, either. An' if I'm right, then, *every single one of you* will be entitled to stand up here." He looked at each cat in turn, right in the eyes, his voice softening to sincerity. "*Every. Single. One.*"

He let his gaze travel across his Clanmates. Fear was still there, but hope was beginning to dawn in their gazes. A few cats nodded slowly, and others lifted their chins slightly as though they'd remembered the sweet taste of unity through arms. Tails lifted. Eyes sharpened.

He made sure that they knew he meant it. His voice hardened to a final call so all would hear. *And remember.* "So're y'all just gonna just sit there, *weeping* for a defeat that'll never come, or are y'all gonna *stand for* ***our*** *home*? Are y'all gonna just *give up*, or are ya gonna ***fight***?!"

As the echo of his voice rang and died through the clearing, the RiverClan cats exchanged glances. They were not afraid, no — uncertainty was shadowing their gazes now. "We fight!" One young voice exclaimed, but only soft murmurs followed.

"Oh, c'mon!" They needed to *feel* it. "Don't tell me RiverClan's filled with belly–crawlers!"

"Of course we're not belly–crawlers!" One of the warriors immediately called out, springing to her paws.

"Yeah!" Another joined in, sounding indignant. "How—"

"Then, *prove* it!" Rapidpaw interrupted sharply instead of letting them finish.

Silence.

"If you're *really* not cowards," Rapidpaw continued, his voice hardening, "then fight for your Clanmates. For what is *yours* and only *yours*. For the cats that are *depending* on *each of you* for *safety*. So," he paused, letting his words sink in, before raising his voice, "*who's with me*??"

`

A second passed. Then: "*We* are." Beigeshine, one of the senior warriors, stood up from the crowd. His sky–blue gaze swept over the still–seated cats around him. "RiverClan will fight for what is ours!"

Another heartbeat of silence. Then, one by one, the Clan murmured consent.

"Y'all sound reluctant." Rapidpaw observed loudly, his blue eyes narrowing — and that was when an idea hit him.

Clan pride. Of course.

"We need more *spirit* to *teach these rogues a* ***lesson***!" He yowled to the night, to the crowd below him. "*Are we* ***cowards*** *or* ***RiverClan****??*"

The answer was given right away — a few cats even sprang up to their paws. "RiverClan!"

"Then we best start *actin'* like it! *Who's* ***winnin'*** *this battle,* rogues or *us*?!"

A soft hesitancy. "We are."

"C'mon! Y'all can do better than that! Who's ***winnin'*** this battle, *rogues* or ***us***?!"

"We are!" No hesitancy this time.

Rapidpaw egged them on, his voice carrying clearly across his Clanmates, his tail curling into the air this time. "Who's always walked these lands, *rogues* or ***us***?!"

"We did!" The voices were stronger now.

"Who are the ***tamers*** *of the tides, rogues* or ***us***?!"

"*We* are!!"

Now he was tapping into their Clan pride — and his own. He raised his voice, making it as strong as it could be. "Who's strong enough to *fight* for what is *theirs* — rogues or ***us***?!"

"*We are*!"

"We'll win this battle, 'cause *we're* ***different*** *from them*! We're strong — *a Clan* — because *that's* who we *are*! So, *who's with me*?!"

"***We are***!!"

Rapidpaw lifted his chin as the Clan cheered their consent. Hope had replaced doubt, adrenaline sparkling in their eager gazes as their Clan pride was reignited.

His gaze fell onto the edge of the crowd, where Charm was looking up at him, her eyes shining with something like pride and love. She blinked slowly at him, as if to silently say, '*That was beautiful.*' Near Highstump's base, Fringeflight met his gaze. The deputy nodded slowly to him, as though he had finally found proof of something he had been searching for.

He had done it. He could see it in their eyes — the pride, the belief.

I've really given them hope. And they're ***proud*** *of me!*

Suddenly, things didn't seem to look so bad anymore.

For once, RiverClan felt *whole* again.

Then, as he leaped off Highstump, the first rogue battle cry reached his ears. RiverClan returned the cry with an even fiercer caterwaul. As the rogues barged into their camp, they were immediately met with fierce claws fueled by passion. Fueled by a love for what they had. Fired up for defending what they held dearest. And Rapidpaw? He didn't even fully register before one word flashed to his mind —

Defend.

And so, he defended.

He let out a war cry that he barely recognized as his own and launched headfirst into the fray. Rogue scent flooded his lungs, and he lashed out at any gaze that he didn't recognize, his veins fueled with a feral fire. He slashed and kicked out at the nearest rogue — a young white cat with brown highlights — sending them stumbling with shock. Then, the rogue's dark eyes narrowed and they charged at him.

Thinking fast, Rapidpaw waited until the last minute and performed a frontal twist before landing on his paws behind them. Quicker than lightning, he then whisked the rogue's paws from under them. They landed harshly on their side, stunned by his speed, but their recovery wasn't fast enough.

Quickly, Rapidpaw brought his weight down like a falling branch, using his — for once — larger size as an advantage of some sort to immobilize them. The rogue bucked beneath him, but Rapidpaw held an iron grip. He lifted his claws, planning to just scare them off, when suddenly—

"*Help*! *There are too many of them*!"

Rapidpaw's head snapped up to the sudden cry that had pierced through the hubbub of the battle. His gaze swept over the mass of cats, but he saw no one that could be the source of the outcry. He turned back to the rogue; there was a flash of white and brown then —

'*Crack!*'

He reeled back with a startled outcry of agony, warm liquid flooding his jaws. He spat down; red colored the pale ground below. Letting out a hiss, he faced forward to see the rogue charging at him, frothing at the mouth with rabid rage.

"***Help***!!!"

Again, his ears angled towards the cry, but that was enough of a distraction. The rouge leaped and lifted *up* before harshly throwing the smaller down onto the ground once again. Breath knocked out of his chest, Rapidpaw didn't even process what was happening before the rogue was on top of him *again*, forcing him down and pinning him to the ground. They sneered. "You *thought*—"

Suddenly, a startled yowl escaped from them, and their lightly colored form was replaced by Fringeflight, who whipped around and kicked outwards, landing a solid blow onto the rogue's flank with his back legs. "*Don't touch my apprentice*!" He snarled, looking impressively twice his size.

So, seemingly seeing that they were outnumbered, the rogue snarled back but scampered away, limping on the foot that Rapidpaw had struck.

"C'mon." Fringeflight quickly helped Rapidpaw back to his paws, who was still a little dazed from the sudden impact to his jaws. "Nothing too bad, huh?"

"Yeah." Rapidpaw muttered. "Though I think I've a permanent overbite now."

Fringeflight didn't even roll his eyes, though. "Look, Rapidpaw. I know what you told us a second ago, but faith isn't going to be enough. There are simply too many of them." Then, the deputy looked him straight in the eyes. "You have to go to ShadowClan to get backup."

Rapidpaw was shocked. "*ShadowClan?* But—"

"I *know* we're enemies!" Fringeflight looked at the verge of panic. "Look, we don't have time—"

A sudden cry cut the deputy off. A brown blur of fur charged at them, and they both leaped back just in time, barely dodging the tackle. Their attacker skidded to a stop and whipped around, but Rapidpaw was already reacting.

He lunged before he could think, catching the rogue by the scruff mid-turn. A sharp cry broke from their throat — but he ignored it. Instead, he slammed them down with the weight of every heartbeat he'd spent training for this moment. They hit the earth with a harsh '*thud*' before laying there, stunned.

Rapidpaw whipped about, facing Fringeflight once again. Fringeflight looked at him in the eyes — really looked. Something unreadable passed through his eyes. Then, "We can't hold off on our own. You have to go to ShadowClan. Tell them we'll owe them big!"

Rapidpaw searched his mentor's gaze. Something shimmered beneath his irises — an urgency and something else.

*I don't have a choice. I **have** to go.*

So, Rapidpaw nodded his consent.

Fringeflight seemed to relax a little. "I know you won't let me down, son." Then, the deputy whisked back, his brown pelt quickly getting lost in the fray.

Son. It felt odd to be called that by his mentor after so long. However, Rapidpaw shook himself out before quickly whisking into the shadows, already mapping out his path to ShadowClan.

Hold on, RiverClan. I'm coming with help. He looked back at his warring Clan before whisking towards the dirtplace, figuring that was the most discreet way to temporarily exit the battle. *Please don't be gone when I come back.*

Chapter XVII →

`` ***Moving Shadows***

Rapidpaw dashed through RiverClan territory, his paws practically flying above the ground. He skidded to a stop at the ShadowClan border, throwing up dust in his wake as he took a moment to crouch and catch his breath.

I'm wasting time.

He forced himself to his paws and scanned the treeline. He was going to go in. His Clan needed it.

So, he picked up his pace again, when suddenly—

'Wham!'

A weight slammed into his side like a surge from the rapids, sending him tumbling with a startled yowl. However, he quickly regained himself and unsheathed his claws, stumbling but ultimately slowing his momentum. He snarled and arched his back, but there was no one.

What in the f<king s*!t?!*

He cautiously lifted his nose and scented the air, then reeled back in surprise.

Is that ... ***StarClan*** *scent?*

Then, as if on cue, a shape launched itself out of the trees. Rapidpaw rolled away to the side instinctively, but it seemed as if it *followed* his movements. The weight landed squarely onto his shoulders when his attacker should have slammed into the nearest tree.

What in all the lake?! He let out a growl and bucked, but his attacker seemed completely unphased. Twisting beneath the weight to get a look at his opponent, his eyes widened like two blue lakes. "*F–Fallenstar*?!"

Familiar orange eyes glared down at him. "So you've finally realized."

"*What* are you *doing*??" Rapidpaw hissed. "Let me go!"

"Hm …" Fallenstar tipped his head to the side, as if thinking. "I'll think about that."

"*I needa go **now***!" Rapidpaw snarled. "B!*ch! *You want RiverClan to get f*<kin' **swamped***?!"

Suddenly, Fallenstar's muzzle brushed lightly over his son's ears. "You are *not* surpassing me." He purred dangerously. "Even if RiverClan has to fall for it."

"*Do ya even f*<kin' **hear yourself***?!" Rapidpaw's voice was shrill with outrage. Blood roared in his ears, and he felt his paws tremble with fury. Suddenly, he found himself kicking out with his hind legs, hitting Fallenstar's starry leg and kicking it out from underneath him with a feral outcry.

Fallenstar let out a snarl — but he tumbled, stardust scattering in his wake. Rapidpaw sprang to his paws and charged like a rabid dog, but Fallenstar had superiority in being a spirit. He whisked forward with a speed no living cat could have and slammed Rapidpaw against the ground. Before the apprentice could react, Fallenstar had pinned him down belly up, paw set perilously onto his throat.

"Don't even try to fight me." He sneered. He unsheathed his claws, the starry white glinting dangerously in the moonlight.

Something clicked in his brain. "*You're* the one who called out … didn't you?" His breath caught in his throat and he froze. "Y–you *traitor*. @$shole! Motherf*<kin' *b!*ch@$s f*<ker*!" His voice trembled slightly, soft as he struggled to keep it under control. Suddenly,

Rapidpaw was out of words. He couldn't tear his eyes off Fallenstar's glinting claws, hating how close they were to the soft tissue of his skin. His breath hitched. "*B!*ch. …*"

"No." Fallenstar murmured, voice soaked in rot. His claws pricked Rapidpaw's skin, drawing blood. "*Conqueror.*"

Rapidpaw flinched, wishing that his claws would just *move* to get Fallenstar off him. But his muscles were frozen, terror paralyzing him. But then, a new scent drifted over to them, stronger than the rest.

ShadowClan scent.

Fallenstar cursed softly, then just vanished.

Rapidpaw let out a shaky breath and slowly rolled onto his belly. *Did StarClan just try to f*<kin'* ***kill*** *me? I didn't know that StarClan could do something like that! Why would Fallenstar attack* ***me****?* Fallenstar's words still vibrated in his thoughts. The threat that his father's soft declaration had carried was more haunting than the claws at his throat. He closed his eyes to find a single clear thought in the chaos before—

"You're *trespassing* on *ShadowClan* territory, *RiverClanner*."

Slowly, Rapidpaw opened his eyes again to see a huge tom, tabby pelt storm–grey and green eyes dark and piercing. *Lightningclaw. Sagestar's son.* He scrambled back to his paws, trying to

hide the tremor in his legs. He dipped his head low. "I–I apologize for the intrusion. But please — you have to listen."

Lightningclaw didn't respond. Just narrowed his eyes.

"RiverClan's under attack." Rapidpaw pressed, voice shaking. *S*!t. Talk normal!* "Rogues. Too many of 'em. Please, we need backup."

Beside Lightningclaw, a black she–cat glanced at her companion, then back at Rapidpaw with guarded eyes. That *look* made Rapidpaw's stomach turn. Doubt. Hesitation.

"We'll f*<kin' owe you!" He burst out, giving up on keeping his composure. "Anythin'. Just— please. Help us." His voice cracked a little. He swallowed hard, claws scraping into the dirt. He *hated* this, begging like a lost kit — but this wasn't for him. This was for *them.* "I wouldn't be here unless it was life or death." He added, hoping that it would convince Lightningclaw and his patrol.

The silence was brutal. Moonlight spilled over the trees, cold and uncaring. Rapidpaw's tail lashed behind him as he tried to keep still, but every heartbeat felt like a scream. *What's taking so long? My Clanmates are f*<kin'* ***dying*** *right now and I'm just* ***standin' here—***

Finally, Lightningclaw's whiskers twitched. He nodded once. "Stay here. All of you." Then, without another word, he turned and vanished into the trees.

Rapidpaw sat down hard. His claws unsheathed, then sheathed again and again. *By all the f*<kin' lakes, they better haul @$s.*

The time it took for anything to stir felt like moons, though it had been mere minutes. Another storm–grey tom slipped past the foliage, his green eyes identical to Lightiningclaw's.

Rapidpaw sprang to his paws. *Thank the skies above!* He dipped his head. "Sagestar. Thank you for coming."

Sagestar lifted his tail in a quiet gesture for silence. "I will answer your call for help, but don't count on me personally leading the patrol." He stepped aside to let a lanky grey tom through, eyes like two yellow suns. "This is my deputy, Gorgewhistle. He will lead the patrol along with my son." He nodded to Lightningclaw. Then, his eyes narrowed. "I trust that you will bring them back safely."

"We can protect ourselves." Lightningclaw objected before Rapidpaw could answer, his eyes locked onto the apprentice. There was a strange look in his eyes as he regarded the smaller tom before him. A moment passed before he continued, dipping his head slightly to Sagestar. "Don't worry about it."

Sagestar narrowed his eyes at his son. When Lightningclaw just looked back, Sagestar flicked his tail. "Off you go, then. Lead the way, Gorgewhistle." The large tom turned to

leave, but not before taking one last look back, his intense green eyes falling onto Rapidpaw's. A silent threat passed from their depths: *If you don't bring my son back safe, your Clan is going to have to worry about something more than rogues.* Then, he was gone.

Gorgewhistle's sharp voice cut him back to the presence. "Well, what are you standing there for? I thought it was urgent."

Rapidpaw nodded tightly. "Follow me." He made sure that the ShadowClan patrol — which was pretty large, making up a whole battle patrol instead of backup — was still following before picking up his pace.

I'm coming, RiverClan. I just hope that you're still there.

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

When Rapidpaw finally skidded to a stop at his camp's entrance, his heart dropped. Bodies were on the ground, but the Colony Of The Blazing Suns was still standing. Blackout was poised on Highstump now, smirking and calling out to the crowd below: "Give up! Y'all f*<kers are finished! ***Hahahaha***! Take that, *b!*ches*!"

Just then, Gorgewhistle dodged around Rapidpaw with a sharp screech that made the fur rise on his spine. "ShadowClan, *forward*!"

A roar broke from the patrol like a wave cracking against the shore. In a blur of pelts and claws, they surged into the fray — crashing into the rogue ranks with sharpened fury. The rogues weren't ready. Yowls rang out, dirt flying out as the battle reignited with a new fever.

Rapidpaw didn't move yet. His eyes were fixed upward, heart beating quicker than a woodpecker's beak. On Highstump, Blackout's smirk had vanished, replaced by a snarl of raw fury. "***No***! ***@$shoooles***!" He screeched at the sight of the ShadowClan battle patrol. "*You don't get to ruin this*!"

Rapidpaw's claws slid out. *It's now or never.*

He inhaled sharply — just once — and flung himself back into the battle, when a cry rang out. Rapidpaw's eyes locked onto the source: Troutpaw, one of the younger apprentices, under a massive rogue who had their fangs bared, claws gleaming. There was no time to think.

He hurled himself forward, slamming full–force into the brown rogue's flank. They tumbled together in a snarl of fur and claws. Rapidpaw drove his paws forward, slashing at the tom's side, desperate to buy a second — just a second — for Troutpaw to escape.

But the rogue was too strong. With a grunt, he bucked hard and threw Rapidpaw like a leaf in the wind. The apprentice hit the ground with a thud, rolled, and sprang up in one breathless motion. His paws faltered, but he held his ground. However, the rogue was already charging. He crouched, the moves taught by Fury running through his head in a frenzied circle.

Come on, think! ***Think****!*

~~*Dust and strike.*~~ Fury advised quickly. ~~*Do the dust and strike move.*~~

Rapidpaw gritted his teeth, quickly channeling his strength into grace. At the last moment, he whisked to the side, letting his tail kick up dust from the ground. The rogue let out a hiss of frustration, spitting in the dirt.

Rapidpaw didn't give him a chance to recover. Quickly, he whipped around and kicked out with his hind legs — landing a solid hit with that and earning a grunt and stumble from his disoriented opponent.

Thanks, Fury.

~~*Don't thank me.*~~

Who knew a Dark Forest tom could be humble?

Refocusing on the battle, Rapidpaw darted in again, ready to take the rogue's paws out from under him and turn his smaller size into an advantage. But before he could make the move, a battle cry ripped through the air — and Lightningclaw burst in from behind.

The ShadowClan warrior slammed into the rogue, his bulk knocking the enemy clean off his paws. Before the outsider could react, Lightningclaw grabbed him by the scruff and

hurled him aside. The rogue hit the dirt, let out a winded hiss, and scrambled away, tail vanishing into the chaos.

Lightningclaw glanced at Rapidpaw as he blinked at the ShadowClan warrior. A moment of silence, then Rapidpaw offered a quick nod to him. To his surprise, Lightningclaw nodded back, the movement sharp but not curt.

“You have some fierce skills there.” Lightningclaw commented mildly. “What’s your name?”

“Rapidpaw.” Rapidpaw flicked his tail, his jaw tight. *I should be telling a warrior's name* ***instead*** *by now.*

Lightningclaw’s green eyes sparked briefly with something akin to interest. “You look a *little* old for an apprentice.”

“Long story.” Rapidpaw returned tightly. But his ears pricked suddenly. Movement — behind Lightningclaw. A lanky rogue, creeping up fast, eyes gleaming with the thrill of a sneak attack. “Behind you!”

Lightningclaw whipped around and lashed out in one fluid strike. The rogue yelped in surprise, stumbling back with a snarl. But before the attacker could fully recover, Lightningclaw darted behind them — fast as a shadow — and slammed his head into their side. The rogue lost balance, momentum flinging them straight toward Rapidpaw.

Instinct took over.

Rapidpaw sprang aside and, in the same motion, lashed out with both hind legs. His claws raked across the rogue's head — a solid hit. The enemy hissed in pain, landing hard before staggering away, their paws fumbling beneath them as they tried to stay upright.

Silence passed between the two toms.

Lightningclaw looked over, his green eyes wide with flickering surprise — and something else. Recognition.

Rapidpaw met his gaze. Nodded once.

A beat passed. Then, Lightningclaw gave a small nod back.

We'd be great battle partners. Rapidpaw realized, and somehow, he knew the ShadowClanner was thinking the same.

So, they would fight shoulder to shoulder, if only for this battle.

As if trained together for moons, the two toms moved to stand flank to flank, mirroring and covering each other as if raised together. It felt strange, to Rapidpaw at least, to be fighting this way with a *ShadowClanner* of all cats. But at the same time, he didn't think much about it — the moves just came to him naturally.

Eventually, the rogues seemed to be slowly pushed back when suddenly a yowl sounded above the battle. Rapidpaw's gaze immediately snapped towards it — along with Lightningclaw's — and dread dropped a rock into his stomach.

Mockingstar was rolling on the ground with the lanky but unmistakable body of none other than Ace himself, the second–in–command to the Colony Of The Blazing Suns. Mockingstar lashed out as if turned young again, snarling like everything he knew depended on the sound. Ace, however, weaved about, striking in the most unsuspecting places.

Ace was skinnier, but he had the size and youth advantage against Mockingstar, making him a deadly opponent to the sickly leader. Quickly, the lanky rogue whisked underneath the smaller tom and bucked, sending the leader up and flipping him onto his back. Mockingstar flipped over onto his stomach once again, snarling and crouching, as if preparing for his own strike.

Ace wouldn't give him time to breath, though.

He struck out like a viper, ramming his head into Mockingstar's side. The leader grunted, looking pained this time, and the momentum of Ace's strike sent him right onto his back once again, exposing his vulnerable belly.

Rapidpaw exchanged an alarmed glance with Lightningclaw. Lightningclaw's eyes dashed between the fighting high ranks. His eyes narrowed, then he nodded towards the two. "You stay out here and fight, I'll help them." The ShadowClan warrior then whisked towards the pair, paws carrying him across the battlefield.

Rapidpaw tipped his head to the side slightly as he took a second to look after the ShadowClanner. He then shook himself out and turned back towards the main mass of cats, when suddenly—

"*Gotcha*!!"

A flash of void–black fur launched itself at him with the victorious cry, but Rapidpaw was on high alert. He jumped to the side just as Blackout slammed his paws down onto the earth with a hard *'thud'*. The rogue tom then whirled around, white teeth a pearly contrast against his dark pelt as they gleamed in the rising moon's ghostly light, golden earrings glinted on his ear.

~~*Take cover in the shadows, then attack from there.*~~ Fury urged. ~~*This is your territory, so use it as your advantage. Catch him by surprise.*~~

However, before Rapidpaw could do so, Blackout moved first. He leaped forward once again, and Rapidpaw lashed out, but the outsider was smarter than that. Swiftly, the rogue leader landed and skidded, kicking up dust and obscuring Rapidpaw's vision of his enemy. The apprentice coughed a few times, backing up instinctively as the dirt tickled his airways. *He's so d@*n fast — and he fights dirty. This b!*ch!*

Recovering himself, Rapidpaw snarled and scanned the settling brown when suddenly his back bumped against something. The camp wall.

Just like that, he was cornered.

The air cleared out, then, the camp faded. The yowls, the clash of claws against teeth — gone. All Rapidpaw could hear was the crunch of pawsteps drawing closer, deliberate and cruel. The world narrowed down to a single dark shape, and the gleam of gold on his ear.

“Well, well, well.” Blackout purred, bloodied claws on display as a smirk revealed the tips of his fangs. “Seems like it’s just you and me now — and you’ve got nowhere to run.”

Chapter XVIII →

`` ***Nothing Gold Lasts Forever***

“So? What will it be, little warrior?” Blackout stalked up to stand nose to nose with Rapidpaw, his sneer adding to the victorious glint in his coppery eyes. “It best be surrender … ‘cause I just *hate* giving second chances.” In a threatening flash of obsidian black, the rogue leader lifted a claw to Rapidpaw’s cheek and drew a line of red just underneath the vicious scars that Fury had given him on one of their first encounters.

Rapidpaw hissed and batted Blackout's paw away, hackles rising. "I don't need a second chance."

"Oh, how *noble*." Blackout mocked, swaying his head from side to side to add to the effect. "How brave. What a terrible waste." He flicked his tail and took a step back, rearing onto his hind paws and flicking his front paws towards himself. "C'mon, attack me, then, *warrior*. Or should I say kit?"

"Kit yourself!" Rapidpaw felt the hairs stand on his back and his cheeks heat with rage.

"Aw, did I pinch a nerve?" Blackout taunted.

Rapidpaw didn't let him finish. Before he could think, his paws were moving. He lunged at Blackout quicker than a viper, yowling out a ferocious cry that he would have barely recognized when in the right mind. His paws then landed on ground, however, and a sudden stab of pain arched through his side and he skidded, unsheathing his claws to stop his momentum while snarling madly. Red shone on his flank and blood dripped from a jagged clawmark where Blackout had hit.

Blackout was standing the opposite way, his paws elegantly placed on the ground before he whipped around, a smirk revealing his strikingly white teeth in his muzzle. It seemed that the rogue leader had side–stepped before kicking his back paws against Rapidpaw's flank to send him skidding back.

Rapidpaw barely had time to take his next breath before Blackout whisked towards him, his movements looking as though he were flying instead of charging.

Reflexes didn't need time to think. Rapidpaw rolled to the side and lunged forward, jaws open and teeth ready to pierce.

Blackout was ahead of the game. The rogue leader whipped around and instead snagged *his* scruff. The ground ran back from Rapidpaw's paws before jumping forward again to meet him, slamming into him and sending him rolling. The camp wall then soon met his back, ultimately stopping his unwilling somersault before his own claws could. He flipped onto his paws and spat onto the ground. Red darkened the sand.

Blackout knew all his tricks.

He knew all the moves Rapidpaw did.

Then, it clicked.

Fury.

Of course — Blackout was the leader of the Colony Of The Blazing Suns, and was the son of Sunrise, known as Sunrise Reaper in battle for his great skill. The tom had taught Blackout all his knowledge, and the leader's partner for life had taught Fury all that *she* had known. And Fury had passed down his skills to Rapidpaw.

*Fury knows all that Blackout knows — but Blackout knows more. Well, **f*<k**!*

~~*Blackout's about to strike — do the dodge and strike move.*~~ Fury advised.

And now he speaks. Rapidpaw retorted back. *Why in the livin' hell didn't you tell me this?!*

Whatever Fury had been about to reply, however, was cut short.

Paws slammed into Rapidpaw's shoulder, and then Blackout was atop him. Rapidpaw snarled and kicked up, momentarily stunning the rogue leader. One more kick sent Blackout reeling and he stumbled off him, snarling. A snarl ripped from his throat in return as he sprang back onto his paws and lunged.

But with any plan, Blackout was faster. The rogue leader lowered his head and drove it into Rapidpaw's chest, sending the smaller tom reeling backwards before his opponent knocked him over. Paws slammed onto his shoulders and back paws.

He was pinned.

And Blackout was on top.

Rapidpaw snarled and tried to lash out with any of his paws, but none would move.

"Oh, look at that. Seems *you're* the kit after all." Blackout mocked, tone laced with arrogance as he gloated.

"This battle isn't over!" Rapidpaw started, but Blackout continued.

"Oh, *right*." Blackout pretended to remember. "I *still* have to kill you." One of his front paws twitched, the obsidian claws so black that they didn't reflect the moon and stars above. "On the other paw, I *do* think that you deserve a rather … slow ending. Ya know, keep the suspense before you meet the rest of your Clan. ***Ha***!"

"Ya think that just 'cause you've managed to pin me, RiverClan will *bow*?" Rapidpaw snarled. "Never thought that a rogue like you could ever be naive."

One of Blackout's front paws then forced Rapidpaw to look to the side. The apprentice tried to kick back despite his paws being pinned, but soon he froze as though turned to stone.

There was Ace, Mockingstar pinned underneath his lithe frame. In a flash of white claws, red sprayed. For a second, Mockingstar's green eyes connected with his. Then, they faded, and he slumped.

He didn't get up.

Ace stumbled. He gagged then fell to the side with the same stillness, but Rapidpaw didn't notice.

"*S*!t*. No. …" Was all he could muster in his breath that he had left.

Blackout forced his sight forward again. “Your leader is dead, and I’m still standing. So, go on, by all means. Say that again.” He snarled. Then, he tipped his head at Rapidpaw’s shocked face. “Hmm. Nope, actually, I won’t let ya.”

Suddenly, Blackout’s paw flashed forward. Instantly, Rapidpaw found it hard — no, *impossible* — to drag in another breath. No matter how he opened his jaws, no matter how he tried, no air would come in.

It felt as though his throat and lungs were on fire. He tried to remain defiant, but panic sparked uncontrollably inside him.

***F*<k**, he blocked my windpipe!*

~~*Keep calm.*~~ Fury’s voice drifted into his thoughts like a breeze, but it did nothing to calm the alarm bells going off all around inside. ~~*Keep calm, and think. I can help you out—*~~

“Fight back! Go on, try!” Blackout gloated.

Rapidpaw hammered at Blackout’s forearm, over and over, but no air came.

I’m gonna f<kin’* ***die*** *— I— **f*<k**— I didn’t even get my **f*<kin’ name**!*

~~*Rapidpaw, listen to me!*~~

His vision was getting hazy.

Burn— the f<kin'— stars... **ALL OF THEM**!*

~~Rapidpaw, calm the f*<k down!!~~

Blackness pressed against the corners of his sight. Then—

"***Get off him**!!*"

The weight vanished and was replaced by a blur of ginger and white and black. The voice was a screech of rage, protectiveness. A cry as if to save what was dearest to the owner.

Rapidpaw took a gulp of air followed by several more before he found himself coughing and wheezing. How thankful he was to *breathe*, but then he saw his savior.

Charm.

She fought as though she were fighting for her own life and not his. Her paws flashed this way and that, her teeth bared at her father's face as though he were her rival enemy. "Leave him!"

"Or *what*?!" Blackout screeched. "You'll *kill* me?!"

"My loyalty is *here*." Charm hissed, circling the black tom. "And you *aren't* my father."

"You *traitor*!" Blackout snarled. "I *knew* I should've killed ya when you were *born*!" A feral glint caught in his dark eyes.

"Ch–Charm— no … d–don't. …" He had meant to yowl out the words, but his vocal cords wouldn't work as his body struggled to recover from Blackout's attack. "N–no, go. …" His paws shook and he could barely keep on them as he crouched, wheezing as he breathed heavily.

He had to move his paws, but he just *couldn't*.

Then, Blackout struck.

It happened too fast, but it might as well have been in slow motion.

The moon finally reflected Blackout's claws. It glinted red … then connected.

A small gasp, then a dull *'thud'*.

"***Charm! NO!!***"

The voice was from afar, but they might as well have been the closest they could be. Suddenly, his paws were moving again, stun forgotten.

He didn't see the other cats.

He didn't even see Blackout.

He only saw *her*. Her, and the memories that flooded in.

They had been under the stars. The shining dots had been falling in their magnificent showers.

"What'd ya wish for?" Charm's blue eyes had shone in the darkness. They had grinned along with her smile.

"To always be with you." Rapidpaw had answered back, leaning into her. "To always have *you* by my side."

Charm had leaned into him as well. "And I did, too."

"I love you." He had told her. Genuine.

"I love you, too." Genuine as well.

"I'll protect ya, always." Rapidpaw had vowed softly. "With me, you'll always be safe. You'll never have to fear *anythin'* ever again. Ya get me?"

And where was that promise now?

Charm had smiled softly in return. "And I will always be by your side. Always."

And where was that promise now?

He now skidded to a stop beside her. He pressed his two front paws against her wound. "*F*<k*! *No, no, no. …*" He kept on whimpering. "Ch–Charm, look— ***f*<k***— j–just hold on— 'kay? I–I'll get ya to the medicine den an'—"

Charm gasped. "Protect them. …"

Her paws twitched once.

Then, the light left her eyes, never to return again.

"No." Rapidpaw refused to believe his eyes. "*No*! ***Charm***!" His paws shook. His breath hitched. His voice cracked. He nudged her gently with his muzzle. "Hold on. Please, hold on. … Please. …"

But she did not answer.

"You promised to ***f*<king stay***!" The words wailed out of him, but they might as well have been a whisper.

Suddenly, there was a flash of black, and Rapidpaw was on the ground again. Blackout's sneering face was on top. His jaws parted as if he were saying something, but Rapidpaw didn't hear it.

His heart sped up. His teeth bared with the fangs at full display. He didn't even think.

He saw *red*.

"*You motherf*<kin' **murderer**!!*" He leapt forward and slammed Blackout to the ground. "*I'll f*<king **kill** you and your b!*ch@$s Colony!*" He lifted his claws and they glinted white in the moonlight.

Blackout was faster. Again. His voids–for–claws flashed forward, and an arch of stabbing pain set his face on fire. He let out a screech and reeled back before slapping his paws onto the ground. He whipped around, and saw a black tail vanishing into the trees. "***F*<king COWARD***!"

He was ready to chase after the rogue leader, but his mind was numbing already.

"Yeah!" Called a voice way behind him. "Run until you can't!"

But Rapidpaw didn't hear it. He just stared. His head felt light — too light — and his paws like they couldn't hold him up anymore. Exhaustion suddenly flooded his limbs. *Blackout ran. Burn the stars. ...*

Then, the world tipped sideways, and the night rushed in to stay.

Chapter XIX →

`` ***The Stars Yield***

No voices woke him up. No dreams came. It was all just black, numb, as if he were floating through the void of night. Every now and then, snippets of memories came then went. Came then went. Came then went.

Memories from his kit days.

*"I **will** become a warrior and **protect** both of you."*

And I didn't.

Memories from one night.

"I'll protect ya, always."

I couldn't protect—

"Rapidpaw? … Are you awake?"

The voice was soft, drifting out of the waking world and brushing into dream. Eyes heavy, Rapidpaw forced his eyes open again.

Slowly, things came into focus. Walls with reed–woven storage places, along with the golden she–cat standing over him. Her green eyes were round with worry, but her shoulders relaxed and she let out a soft sigh. "Thank StarClan." She leaned backwards towards the exit of the den. "Fringestar! Come, he's awake!" She then leaned forward as if to examine, but then stopped short. Her tail stiffened slightly. "Do you know where you are? Who I am?"

*Fringe**star?*** He must have misheard her. "... Yeah, I do." Rapidpaw cleared his throat slightly in an effort to get rid of the rasp in his voice though he expected nothing to come of it. "Medicine den … right?"

"Yes, correct." Goldleaf relaxed again. "Can you stand?"

"Uh. Yeah, I think so." Rapidpaw attempted to stand up. His paws felt like they were made of twigs, but he forced himself to stretch. He looked back at Goldleaf. "How long was I out?"

"This would be the second sunrise."

"Was it really that long … ?" Rapidpaw murmured to himself. Louder, he asked, "Nevermind. Where's Charm?"

Goldleaf had retreated to the herb storage. Now, she froze mid–step, her tail ridged again. "Well. …" She glanced at the exit of the den, her reply trailing off.

Rapidpaw narrowed his eyes. "Goldleaf. Where's Charm?"

That night was a distant memory.

He just wanted to know whether by some miracle he had simply dreamed it all.

Goldleaf twitched her ears. "She is—"

"Rapidpaw, thank StarClan above!" Fringeflight's happy exclamation interrupted her. He skidded into the medicine den, his green eyes sparkling with relief. "I was so worried!" Rapidpaw didn't take his gaze off his mentor as the brown deputy whisked to his side. He nudged him gently. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." Rapidpaw answered. His eyes caught on a soft glint on Fringeflight's forehead and he glanced up only to glance right back down.

There was a faint new marking — a diamond shape.

Leadership.

No. He refused that he had actually lived through the night.

"Are you sure?" Fringestar's voice snapped him back to reality.

"Completely." Rapidpaw answered, his voice taking on a tighter edge. He looked Fringestar in the eyes. "Where's Charm?"

Fringestar also hesitated. He exchanged a glance with Goldleaf, then flicked his tail to her.

She dipped her head, then exited the den.

"What do you want to hear?" Fringestar asked when Goldleaf was out of earshot. His voice was soft.

That it was all just a dream. But that wouldn't be an honest answer. "... Tell me where she is." Rapidpaw's voice turned to a mutter as he forced it to keep firm. He feared the answer, but he *had* to know. "Tell me … tell me the *truth.*"

A silence. Then, "She fought bravely."

Rapidpaw averted Fringestar's gaze. "... And she. …"

Fringestar's gaze was full of sympathy. "She didn't make it. … We found her body, but her fur was cold. I'm sorry."

Rapidpaw closed his eyes. His mind turned dormant, spare the conscious thought of trying to keep himself under control.

It failed.

"Take me to her."

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

Dead leaves crunched underpaw as they fell from the wooded area around RiverClan's territory.

Fringestar stopped in his tracks and nodded to a thicket in front of them. "Under the willow tree." His voice was soft with sympathy as he looked into Rapidpaw's eyes.

Rapidpaw only twitched an ear in acknowledgement. He started to continue forward, but stopped soon after as Fringestar's voice sounded behind him.

"Do you wish for privacy?"

Rapidpaw just nodded.

"I'll wait for you at camp." Pawsteps receded, then the woods were silent.

Rapidpaw continued on his way. He half hoped that Charm would be there, underneath the willow tree, waiting to welcome him and hold him in her paws.

But when he entered the small, slightly hilly clearing, there was no one. Only the willow tree and a small mound of dirt that nested in front of it.

For a while, Rapidpaw didn't move. He just stood there, staring at the still earth as if he could claim her back simply by his gaze.

He crouched in front of it and leaned down. The soft scent of vanilla washed over his senses and numbed his mind. He closed his eyes, and for a second, he could almost see her again with those lovely sky–blue eyes. He could almost feel the love from them along with from inside him. Almost, he could hear her voice again, soft and proud.

"I love you, Rapidpaw. I love you so, so much."

And I love you, too.

He wished she could hear him when he said it, but time wasn't so kind as to rewind. Her soul was free now, and he could never reclaim it.

StarClan, give her the peace she deserves. Accept her as a warrior of RiverClan coming to your ranks.

...

His breath hitched. He curled up beside her final resting place. Three words, "I'm s–so sorry. …"

Then, the silence broke along with something inside him, and tears turned whimpers to sobs.

I'm so, so sorry.

The sun had hid behind the rest of the earth and the moon had colored the horizon silver by the time Rapidpaw found the strength to climb onto his paws again. He forced himself to look back in the direction of camp and not to the willow tree. His breath didn't hitch. His sight aimed forward and at nothing. His paws seemed to move on their own, without his consent.

The trek was short, but it might as well have lasted moons on end. When he finally had dragged himself back to camp, the silver disk above was riding high on the waves of night.

The camp was still. Silent. Soft snores came from the warriors' and medicine den. Outside the leader's den, however, was Fringestar. His head had been tilted up to the clear skies above, his dark green eyes distant. However, his ears twitched upon Rapidpaw's return, and his gaze landed on his for a second. Rapidpaw wasn't sure why he held it, but he did.

Fringestar blinked at him. Slowly. With sympathy.

Rapidpaw turned his gaze away. His paws moved for him, towards the medicine den, and in silence he curled up in his nest, but his eyes wouldn't close.

And he knew that they wouldn't close, not for a long while.

Goldleaf shuffled through a stack of herbs once again. She then dragged out a stalk of green and set it in front of Rapidpaw. "Chew this into a poultice and then put it in that leaf over there, please." She indicated a small leaf off to the side with her tail.

Usually, Rapidpaw would have objected. But that was before. Now, he just listlessly shoved the bitter tasting herb into his jaws and started to chew, not even bothering to do anything else.

What's the point, anyways? It's all fallen apart already.

He spat out the chewed up herb to add to the marigold poultice. He let out a soft sigh.

"This thorn hurts — I can't just sit here forever, you know!" Levelrhythm, one of the newest named warriors, twitched her ears impatiently. "How long does it take to—"

"Levelrhythm." Goldleaf chided. "Patience is a warrior's virtue as well, isn't it?"

Rapidpaw twitched his ears, but did not say anything. *Levelrhythm's acting like she knows everything. Arrogant!*

In reality, he didn't care about the she–warrior's comment. His tail twitched, jealousy setting fire and ice to his blood.

Levelrhythm had the privilege of having what any cat would have wanted. She had a stable, loving family of two parents and three siblings. She was a successful warrior, serving her Clan with faith. And now? Now, she was complaining. Complaining while *he* was stuck in the medicine den, sorting herbs when he should be out there, serving alongside his Clanmates.

Ungrateful furball.

He let out a soft growl.

Goldleaf's ears twitched, and she glanced at him. She brushed her tail across his for a second in a seemingly effort to comfort him. Rapidpaw snatched his away, curling it tightly around his paws.

Goldleaf didn't say anything. If she had intended to, she wouldn't have gotten the chance to.

Fringestar poked his head through the medicine den's entrance. Rapidpaw felt the leader's gaze on him, but didn't turn his head from the herbs in front of him.

"A word, Goldleaf." Came the former deputy's voice.

Goldleaf's whiskers twitched in surprise. "But I have an ongoing session—"

"It can wait." Fringestar interrupted, a sudden hint of sharpness in his tone. "I need you now."

"... Okay, I'll be right there." Goldleaf glanced at Rapidpaw. "Rapidpaw, just— take the thorn out of her paw and have her clean it before you put on the poultice, okay? Don't put on the cobwebs, I still have to show you how to do that. Oh, and—"

"*Goldleaf.*" Fringestar's voice took on a sharper edge. "Outside."

"Right." The medicine cat took one last look at Rapidpaw and Levelrhythm before slipping outside, Fringestar bringing up her rear. "Right."

A moment passed. Then, from beside him:

"Well? Are you going to take out this thorn or what?" Levelrhythm glared at him. "Seriously, Rapidpaw, you really think you can be a good medicine cat for her? I would have learned how to pull out a thorn by now!"

Rapidpaw twitched his ears. He narrowed his eyes at her from the side of his vision. *Shut up.*

Levelrhythm continued with a scoff, "Fringestar must be out of his mind to keep such a useless—"

That was the *last* straw. Quick as lightning, Rapidpaw snarled and whipped around, paw raised, and struck her on her jaws. Claws sheathed, though. Before she could even cry out, he was muzzle to muzzle with her, whiskers nearly brushing.

"*Who the f*<k you callin' useless*?" He growled. He didn't give her a chance to answer. "You think you're the s*!t, huh? You have *no f*<king idea* what I've done only to end up *here*! What I *gave* for *this godd@*n Clan*! The f*<king *energy* I've spent only to be f*<king *ignored like some f*<kin'* ***kit***! What *s*!t* I've *seen* only to get *clawed* in the *back*!" He bared his teeth at her. "Lemme tell you something, *Levelrhythm*: if you're f*<kin' callin' someone *useless*, it best be *yourself*, 'cause I *don't* f*<king *want* to *say* this *twice*."

Levelrhythm narrowed her eyes. "You know what, Rapidpaw?" The brown and gold she–cat started, her voice cool as her pale gaze. "You are *such a* ***spoiled*** little furball it's painful!"

"***I****'m spoiled*?? ***Ha***!" Rapidpaw felt his ears warm with rage. *Look at this one!* "Look in the river, Levelrhythm, and *tell me* who's ***f*<king spoiled***!"

"Rapidpaw."

Rapidpaw whipped around, fangs still on full display, only to retract them as his gaze fell on Fringestar. The leader's gaze was emotionless as he looked between the two feuding cats. "A word."

Rapidpaw's tail flicked rapidly for a heartbeat or two before silently slipping out of the den after Fringestar.

The oak–brown leader led his former apprentice over to a secluded spot behind the leader's den. He sat down with his tail curled around his paws, dark green eyes thoughtful.

Rapidpaw mirrored his position, his eyes narrowed. "Well? I'm listenin'."

But Fringestar didn't speak right away. His gaze was distant again, and he was looking slightly away from Rapidpaw. Then, finally, softly, "I heard what you said in the medicine den."

Rapidpaw tensed, paws tucking under his belly. "So? What'd ya think?" He asked sarcastically.

Silence. Again. Fringestar took a moment, but he soon looked Rapidpaw in the eyes. Then, instead of replying, simple and soft, "Are you happy here?"

Rapidpaw twitched his whiskers in surprise. "Huh?" *Surely I've misheard him.*

Fringestar twitched his ears slightly. "Are you happy here?" He repeated, tipping his head to the side. "You can tell me the truth."

For a moment, Rapidpaw didn't reply. He flicked his tail. *He's asking for me to be blunt. So I'll be blunt.* "I *would* be happier if I had what I want." He grumbled. "But somethin' about honoring *promises* seems to cause *problems* 'round here."

"It's StarClan's will." But Fringestar looked conflicted.

"But is it?" Rapidpaw snapped back, his ears leaning down. "Sure, Mockingstar thought it was. But do *you* really believe that, Fringestar? Do you?"

Fringestar didn't reply, but only twitched his ears and looked away again.

"You don't know s*!t!" Rapidpaw felt the words pour out before he could stop them. "You don't know what happened out *there*. I *risked my f*<kin'* ***life*** for this Clan! So many times! I could've not stepped up in the disarray, y'know." He added, frost lacing his words. "I could have let everyone drown in a flood of their own making. But y'know what I did? I stepped up like the little s*!t I am! Not for credit, but 'cause I *cared*! 'Cause I thought that fighting with meant fighting *for*!" His voice rose a pitch. "*To fight side by side*! *To build up one another to face off a threat*! *But you turn it around! F*<k*! ***All of you do***!"

"Rapidpaw, it's not like that—" Fringestar started to object, but Rapidpaw didn't let him.

"Ha! Of *course* it ain't f*<kin' like that!" Rapidpaw retorted sarcastically. "It never is! 'Cause *I'm* just a b!*chy kid who can't shut the f*<k up! Who can't just *accept* 'StarClan's will', huh?!"

Fringestar tried to interrupt with a soft, "I understand—"

But Rapidpaw continued on, not even stopping when his leader started talking. "I don't think you're dumb, Fringestar — I think you're quite on the smarter side. So tell me, if it's not really like that, why does it f*<kin' feel like it is?"

It took a moment. Fringestar looked away, seemingly taking a breath before responding. "You are unhappy here, aren't you?" He asked softly.

Rapidpaw pinned back his ears. "Does it *look* like the contrary? And if *you're* about to make a comment as well. …" He didn't complete the sentence. He let out a huff, his tail swaying from side to side. He looked away from Fringestar only to look back seconds later. "Maybe I should just leave — *for good*. Maybe the Colony Of The Blazing Suns has more cats like Charm."

Silence blanketed the two toms. Fringestar's ears were twitching as though recovering from the assault Rapidpaw had bestowed upon them. Then, the leader finally turned back to Rapidpaw. His dark green eyes were sympathetic as he regarded his former apprentice. Then, he let out a small nod, as though to himself.

Rapidpaw stared, surprised. Was that a form of approval in Fringestar's eyes?

Fringestar then slowly rose to his paws. “You’re right, Rapidpaw. We did claw you in the back for nothing. Ignored you when you were talking sense.” His voice was sincere. “I will fix that for you. You will no longer be ignored.” He slipped past the smaller tom and flicked his tail invitingly forward. “Come. Let’s fulfill your promise.”

Rapidpaw followed the leader with his gaze for a moment. Again, he blinked, but slower this time. Confusion tied a knot in his belly. Then, with narrowed eyes, he moved his paws, his steps slower than of Fringestar’s.

Fringestar was waiting in front of his den. He nodded, more clearly this time, when Rapidpaw finally emerged, blinking in the startlingly bright light of dusk.

The leader of the two leaped up onto Highstump. He landed with the grace of a butterfly. “Let all cats who are old enough to swim gather to hear my words!”

The Clan’s bustle dimmed. Cats gathered around Highstump, a few grumbling things like, “I was having an *amazing* nap along with an *amazing* dream. …” and “What now?”

But Fringestar didn’t flinch. His gaze swept the crowd, his irises reflecting the orange sun like fire above leaves. “Cats of RiverClan.” He began when all had quietened. “I gathered you here today to witness something that is long due to be held.” He flicked his tail, locking his gaze with Rapidpaw’s. “Rapidpaw, please step forward.”

Disbelief warred with dread. But Rapidpaw's paws moved, and he stepped in front of the leader and the gathered Clan.

Fringestar bobbed his head again, slightly. A smile traced his muzzle once again. "I, Fringestar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn. Rapidpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Again. Promising something. Rapidpaw twitched his ears. Hesitation suddenly clashed with eagerness. *I never want to make another promise that I cannot fulfill.*

But Fringestar was giving him a warrior name. Finally letting him fulfill his lifelong commitment to his family.

So, he took a deep breath and looked Fringestar in the eyes as the Clan murmured softly behind him. When the words slipped off his tongue in a sincere proclamation, simple but there, the cats around fell into a hush once again. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." Fringestar smiled, his tail curling into the air. "Rapidpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Rapid*fury*. StarClan honors your fierce skill and your unwavering commitment, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Chapter XX →

`` ***Dawn in Darkness***

The cheers carried up into the dusk, seemingly just touching the winking in stars of night. “Rapidfury! Rapidfury!” They called his new name like a battle cry, eyes shining. Supportive, they were, but their chants fell on a deaf soul.

At each proclamation, his ears twitched as though recoiling. *Rapidfury.* What a name. He would never get used to it.

This was supposed to be a moment of glory. A moment of which he would beam at the crowd and soak in the applause that he had dreamed of since kithood. But he couldn’t twitch a muscle. It was as if he were frozen in time, unable to move forward.

His paws felt like stone. His lips wouldn't smile. His heart felt like its strings were being pulled harder and harder as the minutes passed.

There was joy. There was pride. His heart refused to sing.

I got my warrior name.

She should be here. Beside me, receiving hers as well.

He imagined her, standing beside him again. He could almost see her — that proud stance, those beautiful eyes reflecting the dusk.

He closed his eyes.

Charm. ... Oh, Charm. ... Why did the stars have to claim you so soon?

... I wish you were still here.

But then, the cheers fell into a hush. Rapidfury opened his eyes again to see Fringestar with his tail flagged up into the air. Evidently, he had signaled the quiet. His gaze fell onto the newly named warrior, his green eyes insightful and his head tipped to the side with a slight confusion.

"As we all know it," Fringestar began, "Mockingstar has passed a sunrise ago, and I've come to take his place. But I have not named a deputy as of yet. We have to be strong, RiverClan.

We need cats in our ranks who are familiar with the face of hardship. Who never even *thought* of kneeling under pressure and loss." The leader's gaze rested on his newly made warrior for a second before flicking back to the rest of the Clan. "I've made my choice the day I have laid my eyes on him."

The crowd murmured, exchanging sudden nervous glances.

"I say these words in front of the spirit of Mockingstar, and may he see and approve of my choice." Fringestar swept his gaze solemnly across his gathered Clan. "Our new deputy shall be … Rapidfury."

Silence followed the naming. Murmures, then slowly, proclamations began. Soon, the whole Clan roared his name anew, their voices happy and joyful.

Rapidfury's jaws dropped. He stared at the cheering crowd, then looked at Fringestar as though the leader had suddenly grown another ear.

Me? Deputy? Me?!

He wasn't sure what to think about that. Was he supposed to be overjoyed? Maybe. Was he supposed to regret that Charm could never see this? Most definitely.

Fringestar wasn't done. "There is another ceremony we all have to witness. One of growth and the continuation of a young life." He flicked his tail. "Pigmentkit, please step forward."

Immediately, the gold and black tortoiseshell she–kit charged to the front of the crowd. She was grinning with all teeth, her tail fluffed up and her fur tousled as though she hadn't let Morningdawn clean her properly. "Right here, Fringestar!!" She puffed, plopping down onto the ground.

Fringestar allowed a brief, almost imperceivable smile before masking it with his usual solemn composure. "This kit has reached the age of six moons, and it is time that she would be apprenticed. From this day forward, you shall be known as Pigmentpaw. Your mentor shall be Rapidfury. I trust that he will pass down his strength and experience down to you."

His Clanmates exchanged glances. Their expressions were a mix of shocked and confused with a sprinkle of joy. Their murmurs turned to cheers as they cheered the newly named apprentice's name.

Rapidfury was stiff with shock. "I–it's an honor." He began slowly. But then, a sharp cry cut him off.

"Hold up! *Not so fast*!"

Rapidfury spun around to see Silverbrook marching out of the crowd, his ears a soft shade of enraged red.

Silverbrook dramatically stomped to a stop, his chin raised to look Fringestar in the eyes. "Why is *he*, someone who's *just been made a warrior*, get to be *deputy* when *I've* been a warrior

for *moons*! He *abandoned* his Clan! He *dated* a *rogue*! He's supposed to be a *medicine cat*! How can you *possibly* think that he's the right choice??"

"Silverbrook." Fringestar's tail flicked coolly as Rapidfury narrowed his eyes at the silver tom. "I have a feeling that you know exactly why I picked your friend."

"I do not!" Silverbrook objected. He snorted, flicking his tail at the newer warrior. "Look at him! He's practically a kit!"

"Silverbrook!" Fringestar started, his voice sharpening.

But Rapidfury felt rage boil his blood. "*I'm not a f*<kin' kit!*" He snarled, leaping forward to practically stand nose to nose with his friend, his words laced with frost. "What's *wrong* with you anyways? We're *both* warriors now! Just as we dreamed!" His ears flicked down when Silverbrook just went on glaring at him. "You can at least *cheer*."

Silverbrook's lips twitched as if he were suppressing the urge to peel them back in a snarl. "No. You ran away. You put up a show and ran off on my warrior ceremony. It was supposed to be a day of *glory*, but your *fit* soured it." He thrust his muzzle close. "Did *you* cheer?"

"Yes, I did—"

"I was *always* there for you — always!" Silverbrook continued his rant, not even batting an eye at Rapidfury's objection. "I *never* soured *any* moments for you — I only *cheered* for *you* the *whole way*. And what did *you* do, Rapidfury, when I needed your support the most?"

Rapidfury's ears flicked, surprised. "I *literally*—"

Silverbrook wasn't waiting for an answer, though. "That's right: *nothing*. Nothing at all. Only caused a racket like a *kit* who was *denied his mossball*! Then, you left. Left, *left*, ***left***!" Silverbrook stomped his front paw. "So why should I cheer for you now, after that *betrayal*?" His voice lowered to a snarl. He whipped his gaze to Fringestar. "And *you* broke the warrior code by not naming a deputy the moonhigh you became leader!" He snapped his gaze back to Rapidfury. "And if you're *not* a kit, then *prove it*!"

And with that, the silver tom lunged, black claws at full display.

Rapidfury yowled in shock and rolled to the side. Silverbrook's paws slammed onto the ground so hard that dust flew up. Then, quicker than an adder, the warrior's tail whisked forward.

Suddenly, Rapidfury was on the ground. He rolled onto his paws, but then there was a flash of silver, and claws connected with his jaws. He stumbled, stars dancing in his vision, just scarcely keeping on his paws as shock numbed his senses. He shook out his head to see Silverbrook glaring at him through those blue eyes, his ears pinned and his teeth on full display as though he was facing a Colony cat instead of his Clanmate. "Silverbrook! What are you—"

"Look here, RiverClan!" The silver tom ignored him once again. Instead, he pointed a jagged claw at Rapidfury's face. "Look at that scar! That is not from the battle against the Colony! That is from the *Dark Forest*! He trained there!"

"And yet, I'm less spiteful than you!" Rapidfury snapped, rubbing his bottom jaw. "And yet, I don't *attack my own Clanmates* because I'm *jealous*!"

"You're not my Clanmate."

Rapidfury flinched.

Silverbrook took a step forward. "You're my *enemy*. *Our* enemy!"

"That's enough!" Fringestar commanded. He stepped between the two feuding toms, his tail lifted into the air. He glared at Silverbrook, his voice low with venom. "You are *not* to treat our deputy this way! Do you understand?"

Suddenly, the rage disintegrated from Silverbrook's eyes, and the warrior inclined his head. "Y–yes, Fringestar. …"

"Good." Fringestar narrowed his gaze at the watching crowd. Their eyes were wide, and their movements stiff with interest. "Well? Are you all going to just stand there or go back to your duties?" When no one replied, Fringestar waved his paws. "Go on, move your tails!"

Time seemed to unfreeze for the gathered cats, and they dispersed into murmurs as each finished what they were doing before.

Fringestar growled. “Silverbrook, you are coming with me.” He flicked his tail. “Go to my den and *stay there until I come*. Do you understand?”

Silverbrook inclined his head. “Yes, Fringestar. …” Then, with one last glare at Rapidfury, he dashed away towards the leader’s den.

Once the silver tom was out of reach, Fringestar turned momentarily to his deputy, who was still standing with his paws rooted to the ground. “Rapidfury.” He began gravely. “You need to set your authority with your Clan.” He nodded to the dispersed cats. “They just saw their deputy get almost humbled, and their respect is fragile.”

Rapidfury nodded mutedly.

“Good.” Fringestar momentarily rested his tail onto his shoulders. “Go on, organize the dusk patrols with your head high. Then go to Goldleaf and get yourself checked up. You deserve this honor.” The brown leader then smiled before turning to bound towards the leader’s den.

Rapidfury looked after his leader, then he heaved a heavy sigh.

By all the lake, what the f<k am I doing?*

<.> | <.> | <.> | <.>

"So … what'd ya learn today, Pigmentpaw?" Rapidfury asked, sitting down into a comfortable position.

Pigmentpaw made an effort to roll her eyes. "How to startle a minnow."

Rapidfury flicked his ears irritably. "Pigmentpaw." He glanced up at the sky before looking back onto his apprentice. "Your assessment's just around the corner. Tell me what you learnt so that I know that you're ready."

"Mmm. …" Pigmentpaw tipped her head to the side, as though thinking, though Rapidfury assumed that nothing was really going through her head. She shifted her paws. "Being a warrior is much more boring than once thought, being a kit is better than growing up, yada yada yada. … Oh, and herbs are stinky."

Charm used to complain about herbs to me. Rapidfury snorted, half in bittersweet amusement and half in annoyance. "Surely I'm not *that* useless of a mentor?" He let out a strained sigh. "You've clearly not been paying attention. At least *pretend* to listen to me!"

A few moons had passed since Rapidfury's naming. Leaf–fall had tightened its grip on the territories. The fish were going deeper. Things had calmed down a few, though Silverbrook was still distant from him and patrols were still quite the burr in his pelt. At least there were no more attacks — from outside and inside.

Surprisingly not, however, deputy duties and Silverbrook weren't problems of much. The hardest part of his days by far … was Pigmentpaw.

The girl always found one way or another to annoy the cats she was surrounded by. She was developing a coating of silver over her thorn–sharp tongue — an attribute of which made training her more like a chore than a privilege. She seemed to absolutely not give a flying fish that she was given the honor of being trained by the deputy himself.

Deputy. He would never get used to that title. He still felt his pelt prick with surprise when he overheard his Clanmates call him their deputy — second in line to command. Fringestar had complimented his way of assistance to leadership, however, and Fury had popped in with suggestions every now and then.

Are you always going to be stuck in my head now? Rapidfury had asked one night.

~~*What?*~~ The Dark Forest tom had drawled. ~~*You don't appreciate my presence yet? A shame. I'm quite the advisor, as I think you would know by now.*~~

Yeah, yeah. Rapidfury had grumbled — a little playfully — as he curled up tighter in his nest. *Sure.*

Now, Rapidfury sat on his belly in a small clearing near the river, tail curled around his paws, trying to prepare his apprentice for her upcoming assessment. The girl was a handful, yes — but she was quite the gifted fellow.

Pigmentpaw rolled her eyes again. “But it’s so *boring* when you talk!”

“Learning isn’t all fun and games!” Rapidfury snapped. “Stars, I thought you knew that already!”

“Well, some cats learn better when it’s not all lectures!” Pigmentpaw snapped back. She twitched her ears.

“I *don’t* do ‘all lectures’!” Rapidfury spluttered. “When have I *ever* lectured for more than one or two minutes??”

Pigmentpaw twitched her whiskers, her bright green eyes narrowed. Then, she looked away, not answering.

Rapidfury snorted to himself. *What’s wrong with her today?*

~~*Something’s bothering her.*~~ Fury answered for him. ~~*Don’t you see her body language? Twitchy paws, stiff tail tip, over controlled breathing. ...*~~

Rapidfury narrowed his eyes. *How in all the lake do you notice these things?*

~~*How in all the lake do you not?*~~ Fury snapped back, his tone cool like the leaf–fall rays.

Rapidfury flicked his ears. *... So what do you want me to do?*

~~*What do you mean, 'what do you want me to do'?*~~ Fury snapped. ~~*Help her the best way you know how!*~~

Right, right. ... Rapidfury shifted his paws. *Keep your fur on.*

Fury scoffed, but committed no further comments.

A moment passed. Then, Rapidfury cleared his throat to get his apprentice's attention. She twitched her ears towards him, but didn't turn her head.

"Okay, I'll say it." Rapidfury started gruffly. "I'm sorry for snapping at you. … I just want ya to pass your assessment." He tipped his head to the side. "What's the matter?"

Pigmentpaw's whiskers twitched, blinking in a subtle surprise. She finally turned her head to him, and a silence passed between mentor and apprentice. Then, finally:

"... I'm nervous." She shifted her paws, her paws twitchy and her gaze wavering. "This is the first time I've been … like, *really* tested, y'know? And, like … I don't wanna mess up."

Rapidfury nodded subtly, letting himself open up a bit to her. "That's natural." He soothed. "Every apprentice gets worried on their assessment — even I got worried!"

Pigmentpaw's eyes widened a little, surprised. "You *did*? … I would never expect something like that from you."

"Oh, you wouldn't believe." Rapidfury smiled a little at her, remembering himself when Fringestar — then Fringeflight — had announced his assessment. "I couldn't sleep the night that it came 'round! But hey," he added, keeping up his reassuring tone, "let me tell ya a little secret, eh?"

Pigmentpaw leaned in, her eyes sparkling. "I'm listening."

About time. Rapidfury leaned in as well, locking eyes with her. "The assessment's absolutely *ea–sy*. There's no need to fret at all."

"Really?" Pigmentpaw arched a brow, as though doubtful. "I heard it is really hard, from the newer warriors."

"Oh, pfft!" Rapidfury waved his paw dismissively. "Don't mind them! They say that 'cause they don't know the *flow* as well as you do."

"You're a gifted fellow, Pigmentpaw." He continued. "I'm sure you can dominate whatever StarClan throws at you. After all. …" His eyes sparkled with a slight mischief as Pigmentpaw's ears pricked with interest. "You're *my* apprentice — and whoever I teach can do just that." He nodded to her reassuringly. "You'll see."

A moment passed. Then, Pigmentpaw slowly let a smile up her muzzle. "Okay. … Thanks, Rapidfury." She blinked slowly at him. "So … what was that thing you said about fishing … ?"

Perfect! A warmth — unexpected but all the more welcome — bloomed in his chest. Rapidfury grinned with satisfaction. *Maybe I'm not doing so bad after all.* "You keep your claws relaxed until you spot your prey — but always unsheathed to be ready in case it leaps out of the water. And once you do …" he lifted his paw so that she could see his demonstration, "you unsheathe them *flexed*, okay?" He nodded to her. "Now you try."

Pigmentpaw blinked at his claws. She then lifted up her own before unsheathing them. The tiny daggers curved at perfect timing when she did so, her form being that of a warrior's.

"Perfect!" Rapidfury purred aloud. "Perfect, perfect, perfect."

Look at that magic.

~~*See?*~~ Fury drawled playfully. ~~*I told you once again. She's not your enemy,*~~ he continued in a more serious tone, ~~*teaching is about being a guide, not a sparring partner.*~~

Right. Rapidfury returned, a little flatly.

Because in reality, he was thankful for the other tom's advice. It was good to have someone coach him when he needed it.

Maybe Fringestar was right to name him after all.

They reviewed for a moment after that. Rapidfury glanced up at the sky once again. Sunhigh. He had told Willowbreeze to go on ahead and give Shatterpaw's assessment, even if Rapidfury and Pigmentpaw ran late. *I hope she's actually already out. I still have a few things to run through with Pigmentpaw.*

He tilted his head back to his apprentice, who was in a perfect defense position. He nodded, feeling his fur ruffle with pride. "That looks amazing!" He positioned himself in front of her. "Now, try that offensive position again, but this time pretend that—"

He cut himself off. Mid instruction, yes, but his nose twitched. He snapped his jaws to the air and let them part, scenting the breeze. His ears flicked in surprise. "What's that smell?" The scent … it was strange. Not quite foreign, but it curled under his tongue like smoke — familiar but *wrong*, as if something were pretending to belong. He just couldn't put a paw on it.

Pigmentpaw furrowed her brow at him. "'Smell'?" She repeated, her whiskers twitching with confusion. "What smell?"

Rapidfury narrowed his eyes to the wind. He didn't answer. *Fury? Do you recognize it?*

~~*Well, Rapidfury.*~~ Fury snorted. ~~*I may be able to invade your privacy, but your nose is still only yours.*~~

"Burn the stars." Rapidfury cursed softly. *Can't I have a peaceful assessment with my apprentice?* He flicked his tail to Pigmentpaw. "Pigmentpaw, go back to camp. I'll be there shortly."

He hadn't turned to her, but he could feel her gaze burning with frustration. "But my assessment!"

"You'll get it. But right now, I need you back at camp." Rapidfury returned sharply. Then, he sighed, softening his voice. "... I'll come back when I've figured out this scent, okay?"

Silence. Then, "... Fine." Claws scraped the dirt. Then, a soft, "But don't you *dare* not come back." Finally, paws receded, and the apprentice's scent faded.

Rapidfury curled the tip of his tail, trying to get himself to be less jumpy. *It's probably just a trespasser, or something.* But then, why didn't he recognize the scent?

Should I do this alone?

~~*The decision is only yours to make.*~~

Rapidfury flicked his ears in frustration. *Do you seriously not have any advice for once?*

~~*That **is** my advice.*~~

Well, thanks. Sarcasm edged his voice.

~~*You're welcome.*~~ There was no sarcasm in Fury's words — only a soft hint of usual mischief.

That meant that even the former second–in–command didn't know what was going on. *Well, great.* He flexed his claws before retracting them. *Here goes nothing.*

~~*Or everything.*~~ Fury put in casually. ~~*Wouldn't that be thrilling?*~~

Shush it, you're not helping.

Leaves rained down from above. They crunched underpaw and were left shattered. Pawprints formed as he walked. Jaws parted in seemingly forever, Rapidfury stopped to scent the air now and again. The scent was becoming more clear now — it was strong and pungent, setting his nostrils on fire as he edged closer. He wrinkled his muzzle.

It can't be a cat trying to hide their scent.

Surely if it is, they wouldn't want to be detected so easily?

Or maybe, he continued musing as he stuck his muzzle into a patch of ferns, *this cat is just very stupid.*

~~*Turn back.*~~ Fury's voice suddenly chimed in his mind once again.

Rapidfury blinked in surprise. *Why would I do—*

~~*Behind you!*~~

The snap in his Dark Forest mentor's voice was no alien to him. He whirled around, ears pinned against his skull, but. …

But *nothing. Huh?*

~~*Don't—*~~

Out of the blue, there was a flash of silver and black. Starlight slashed the air like a striking viper, and suddenly the air was knocked out of his lungs. Without any time to react something suddenly whacked him upside the head. He stumbled forward, airways wheezing and ears ringing from the swift assaults. The world swirled sideways and he turned in a circle. …

But there was nothing.

He bared his teeth. "Show yourself!"

"Now, why would I do that?"

His ears pricked as a voice responded. Another tom, and his words drawled in a familiar way. A chilling, familiar way.

Rapidfury unsheathed his claws. He spun in a circle once again, scanning the trees. "Who—"

But his words were cut short. Instead, a yowl escaped him as something landed onto his back. Thinking fast, the young deputy dropped onto his back and rolled. A hiss sounded from behind him. The claws released from his back but not before fur tore from his spine. Letting out a hiss of his own, he hopped onto his paws. He whirled around to face his enemy, but then—

There was a blaze of starlight, and claws connected to his head. Then, in rapid succession another blow landed to the same spot. Then another to his flank. His paws skidded on the grass and his other side collided with something — most likely a tree. Feeling like the air was being squeezed out of his lungs for a painful second, he attempted to move his paws. However, they only moved in a way that was least desirable — down. His front pads caved in onto themselves and he stumbled, struggling to regain stability in his spinning vision.

There had been no time to react. His head and body throbbed as though a whole tree had suddenly fallen onto him.

“Oh, great stars!” The same voice drawled, amusement lacing their voice with venom. “That was terribly easy. I actually expected a harder fight, you know.”

Blinking, Rapidfury’s vision slowly cleared. Slowly, the snow–white speckles became clear, and the bright orange eyes revealed themselves. A smirk was curled up their muzzle. Starlight flickered and danced in and across their midnight black fur.

“Fallenstar!” Rapidfury cleared his throat, hating how his previous shock had made it gnarly.

"Missed me?" The StarClan tom purred, the sound not at all warm.

"You wish." Rapidfury retorted, curling his lips. "Came back for round two?"

"Hardly." Fallenstar snorted. "I wouldn't bore myself on purpose now, would I? No." The former leader continued, not giving Rapidfury a chance to respond. "This isn't round two." Fallenstar took a step closer, his pearly fangs peeking out of his maw. "I came to finish what I've started. This, my son, is the *final* round."

"You don't deserve StarClan." Rapidfury spat. "Even the Dark Forest wouldn't want ya!"

"They wouldn't, yes?" Fallenstar's eyes sparkled. "Then why have I been there myself? But, then again, *you* would most *definitely* know better than I. After all, your little friend is there, isn't he? What is his name — Fury? Oh, and your girl most likely went there as well." Rapidfury opened his jaws to snap back at him, but Fallenstar continued without even as much as a flick of his tail.

He only moved to circle around the RiverClanner of the two, his smirk curling higher. "You stayed with a Colony cat. You trained with a Colony cat. You fell for a Colony cat. By the stars, you even *talk* like a Colony cat. You're a traitor to your own kind. I can hardly say that *you* deserve StarClan either, eh?

"So, please. Save your breath from righteousness. Because, you and I? We are the *same*. Like father like son."

"You're wrong!" But at the same time, Rapidfury felt his resolve wear thin. "We *ain't* the same! We *ain't* 'like father like son'!"

"Yes?" Fallenstar taunted. "Prove it then, shall you? Or are you too scared to challenge your lover's killer?"

The wind seemed to die, and the birds' songs seemed to come to an end. For a second, all that he heard were two words spare for his own beating heart.

... 'Lover's killer.'

But half of his mind still felt like he had misheard. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Quit it with the smooth talk!" Rapidfury snarled, striking the tree to get the dirt out from between his claws. "We both know that it's *Blackout* who dealt the final blow." He swallowed hard, hoping that Fallenstar didn't hear the soft tremor in his voice.

"Blackout, eh? Cats really love to blame things on him these days." Fallenstar scoffed with a subtle roll of his eyes. "But I'm sure you're smarter than that. Surely you are?"

A moment passed. Some of Fury's words suddenly echoed through his mind once again.

... 'All I can tell you ... is that the hawk comes from above. ... And you'll never see it coming until it's too late. ... Unless you look very closely. ...'

"I saw something." Rapidfury finally mustered. "At the Colony. I saw somethin' entering Blackout's layer." As he spoke, the pieces were coming together in his head. He looked Fallenstar in the eyes, his head pinning down. "That wasn't an illusion, wasn't it?"

"Finally, he is using something other than his claws." Fallenstar have a toothy grin, his tail flicking back and forth ominously.

But Rapidfury didn't answer this time. He just narrowed his eyes, silent.

"You are quite the bright one, you know. When you use that little head of yours." Fallenstar continued smoothly. "You would have made an invaluable addition to the Colony Of The Blazing Suns — Blackout is missing out."

"You led them here. It wasn't Balebite, wasn't it? It was you! *You* sold out the Clan! Ya sold out *RiverClan*!" Rapidfury snarled, his fur prickling with rage. "You flaming piece o' fox dung! Traitor! Traitor to your own Clan that you've once led!"

"No, but you've gotten it all wrong again." Fallenstar chided mockingly. "I am *preserving* my Clan. Protecting us from ruin. From *you*. Because you, my son," he took a step closer, "would undoubtedly lead us to so."

"So many Clanmates injured. Dead." Rapidfury's vision was beginning to haze with fury. "*You* killed them." He arched his back, his claws sliding out like white daggers. "It wasn't Blackout, not the Colony at all. *You* killed them! *You killed* ***her***!"

Claws sparked in the dying sun.

And the rage let itself loose.

Without even thinking, the young deputy threw himself at Fallenstar. Claws out, they hooked themselves onto star–blessed fur and tore through to ghostly flesh. Fallenstar let out a cry that seemed to be both shocked and furious. The former leader bucked and flung the smaller right off his back. Rolling head over heels, Rapidfury unsheathed his claws to stop his momentum. He hopped back onto his paws with a snarl, teeth on full display.

"And there it is, is it not?" Fallenstar purred silkily, shaking dust off his pelt. "The want for redemption! Retribution! The need to validate one's actions."

"Nah." Rapidfury spat, tail curled in suppressed rage. "This ain't no retribution. I should tell ya that I, as myself, don't need none of that." He took a step forward. "*You* should be the one begging for validation, for redemption. But, at the same time, you've made it fade for y'self." He took another step forward, barely containing the overwhelming urge to claw that smirk right off Fallenstar's maw. "This ain't 'bout what was *desired* anymore, Fallenstar. This's 'bout what was *taken*. This, *dear father*, is *revenge*."

"'Revenge'? What a brutal word." Fallenstar mocked, but his orange eyes narrowed. "And one too old for your age."

"*No one* tells me what's *too old* or *too young* for me." Rapidfury hissed, hopping up onto higher ground so his muzzle was close enough to Fallenstar's that their whiskers brushed. "*Least of all* ***you***!"

"Fair enough." A glint suddenly sparked in the StarClan cat's eyes. "I see that the loss of your little rogue has fine tuned your attitude."

Rapidfury wouldn't have that. With an outcry like a bird of prey's, he lashed out with his teeth. They bit into Fallenstar's scruff and he whipped his head to the side. Brute force threw the former leader rightwards. He skidded on the soil, kicking up dust and dirt to send it adrift. He snarled, his glowing irises holding a feral glint to them.

Rapidfury didn't even flinch, returning the favor as his jagged claws glinted in the sun.

Paw aloft, claws flexing, Fallenstar's front paw hovered like a scythe about to fall. The white tipped black seemed to reflect the auburn beams as stellar light. "The Dark Forest is bleeding into your gaze, young one. Have you looked at your reflection lately?"

"I've looked enough." Rapidfury's tail lashed left and right like a whip. "I've seen my eyes, ain't no need to point it out."

"Yes?" Fallenstar's smirk returned slightly. "That red color at your pupils?"

"Yeah."

"And it bothers you not?"

"Nope, it doesn't."

Fallenstar's smirk finally vanished for a second. "Why so?"

"'Cause from what *I've* seen …" Rapidfury took a step forward, "Dark Foresters seem to be far better than StarClanners!"

The starlight on Fallenstar's fur seemed to falter for a second. A smile then reappeared on his muzzle, it being more unnerving than real. "Then, there you shall go."

Starlight flashed, but it never reached. Instead, a weight slammed into his side and a wind whisked by him. Claws grazed his throat, then he was on the ground — again.

Bark catapulted from the tree that had been behind him. Fallenstar's claws scored deep gouges into the bark. Undoubtedly, it would have been a death blow to any cat within range.

The weight above him vanished. Ghostly white pelt flashed, and black paws grazed the ground. Red eyes flashed in the sundown light, and a black tail tip curled in defense. "Paws off, ya wretched worm!"

The air seemed to still around them, broken only by the heavy rasp of Rapidfury's breath. Then—

"So, the big, bad protector came after all, eh?" Fallenstar's sneer shattered the silence. "And still sporting that Colony accent. How cute!"

Fury bared his teeth. "Shut your miserable maw before I tear it out!"

Fallenstar chuckled, the sound not at all endearing. "Of course you would say that."

"Fury!" Rapidfury finally snapped himself out of his shock. "What're ya doin' here?"

"Savin' your f*<kin' @*s." Fury replied bluntly, never diverging his gaze from Fallenstar's.

At that, Fallenstar sucked in a breath through his teeth and clicked his tongue in a gesture of mock disappointment. "I do not think you will be doing that, Fury. This is Rapidfury's fight, not yours."

"Whatever's his fight is mine as well." Fury snapped back, advancing forward. "So paws. Off."

"Oh, no. Great heavens." Fallenstar made an effort to roll his eyes. "I am *quaking* in my fur."

"Is that a challenge I hear?"

"Do not be silly." Fallenstar scoffed. "I am one of the best fighters in all of StarClan. You cannot defeat me."

"Yeah? Then why do I smell ya *fear*?"

Fallenstar let out a chuckle. "Oh, dear Fury. You make me laugh. Seriously, you have lost some of your previous sharpness." He flicked his tail to Rapidfury, who was watching the tension spiral with narrow eyes. "You smell your little trainee's fear, not mine."

"He's *not* my trainee."

"Yes? Who is he to you, then?"

Fury narrowed his eyes. A heartbeat of silence, then— "He's a boy who once needed a way to stay on his paws. I tried to provide it the best I can."

"Heartwarming, truly. You've managed to bond with my son very well." Sarcasm itched Fallenstar's voice.

"That's more than I could say 'bout *you*!"

Fallenstar opened his jaws to reply, then—

A snarl escaped from Rapidfury once again and he launched himself at the former leader. He bowled him over and sent his starry form skidding. "I'm *not* your *f**<kin' son*!" He leaped

forward and pinned Fallenstar down. His teeth were bared and just inches away from the former leader's throat. "You lost your kits the moment you left us. The moment you sent that s*!t@*s *greencough* through my Clan and killed the last of your family line. And me?" He bared his claws. They glinted in the dying sun like a verdict of death. "I'm just a tom who wants to avenge what you took from him. So ***good f*<kin' riddance***!"

But his claws never connected. Rapidfury felt a pinch on his scruff and suddenly he was dragged off the StarClanner. His paws scrabbled for ground, claws slicing the air as Fury's grip dug into his scruff like a punishment. The world tilted. Rage blurred everything. Howling in protest with all his might he did, but the grip just got tighter.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Fury's gnarled voice came from above.

"*Let*! *Me*! *F*<king*! *Go*! *I*! *Can*! ***Finish that bone–sucker***!!" The young deputy lashed out at thin air, aiming to just have his paws back on the ground. To have his paws back to Fallenstar's throat.

But it was too late.

Fallenstar scrambled to his paws, hissing louder than a steaming lake. "This is *not* over!"

And with that, he vanished like a ghost swallowed by dusk. And Rapidfury was left behind, with rage caught in his throat and nothing to show for it.

Fallenstar.

Left *alive*.

Alive and free once again.

Rapidfury snarled. "He's gonna *get away*! Fury, *by f*<k*, ***let me go***!! This is ***war***!!"

"You calm down first!" Fury snapped back, but not at all making a move to let up his grip. "He's gone, okay? Gone! Ran away!"

"He *wouldn't* have ran away if you would have just *let me f*<king kill him*!!"

"Do you even *hear* yourself?"

Silence. Then, a soft, "No, I don't."

"Good. Because you were aboutta kill ya own father, for your information!"

"He killed *her*." But his voice shook. The feral thirst for blood had numbed him — now it was draining out, leaving only the hollow space where vengeance should've been.

"You said it yourself." Fury's voice took on a gentler tone. "Blackout dealt the death blow."

"And yet, Fallenstar caused it. And yet …" Rapidfury didn't have the strength to finish the sentence. "He led them here. He might as well have killed her with his own— … f*<kin' claws."

Fury set him back onto his paws. The Dark Forester let out a soft sigh as Rapidfury sat down hard.

He shook his head, avoiding Fury's gaze. The words came out of him like a waterfall suddenly breaking loose. "We had *hope*. A *future*. We built a dynasty like nothin' ever made! I gave myself for it! And now … all I gave is *gone*. It all fell down. We built a dynasty that forever couldn't break, and it all fell down. Tumbled like it was f*<kin' stone.

"I always remember her. Every step I make I always think, '*It should've been hers. It should've been hers*'. It kills me every day to get myself out of my *nest*, for f*<k's sakes!"

He took in a shallow breath. "Everyone. Everyone I get to love. They all leave. They're all taken away from me." He closed his eyes. Tight. But he still felt the cold tears fall. "It's too much. It's just *too much*."

Silence. It reigned for what seemed like moons. Then—

"I know your pain." Fury gently rested a paw onto his in a gesture of comfort. "To some degree, at least."

Rapidfury didn't reply. He just flicked his ears, listening.

"I used to love, y'know." Fury continued. "When I was still new to my position of power in the Colony. Flicker caught my eye. We had something. But then, she chose Blackout instead. Then, Blackout killed her 'cause she didn't give her a boy like he wanted." He shrugged. "I guess she got what she wanted, when she said that she wanted the baddest tom in the whole Colony."

When Rapidfury continued to be silent, Fury let out a soft sigh once again. He rested his tail onto his shoulders. "They're not really gone, y'know. They live in the most secure place the world could ever offer." He gently pawed the RiverClanner's chest. "Right here. In yo heart. And ya can always honor their seat in there by livin' on for *them* if not for yourself. Turn your grief into passion and let that drive ya. Not to anger, but to *passion*. … Can I trust ya to do that?"

Again, silence. It seemed forever before Rapidfury took a deep breath in, then out. "… Y–you're right. … You're right, Fury. … You're right. Again." He opened his eyes and locked them with the Dark Forester's. "Ya can trust me. It might take a bit of adjustin'. But ya can trust me. Kay?"

Fury nodded. "Good. I always knew that I could."

A pause. Suddenly, a rock dropped into his stomach. *Not again.* "Why does it feel like you're sayin' goodbye?"

"'Cause I am." Fury tipped his head to the side, his red eyes glinting with something like amusement. "Surely ya didn't expect me to hang 'round in y' thoughts 'til the end of' y' days?"

Rapidfury dropped his gaze, muttering, "Well, to be fair, I kinda did."

Fury scoffed. "I wouldn't be surprised." But then his eyes sparkled teasingly. "But how can a whole *deputy* have a connection with a Dark Forest cat, huh?"

"But you can go to StarClan." Rapidfury suggested hopefully. "Surely no one will frown upon that?"

Fury gave him a look. "I've done somethings ya wouldn't be proud of, kiddo."

"Still! You've made amends."

"C'mon, Rapidfury." Fury chided. "You know better. Once a Dark Forest cat, always a Dark Forest cat. That place is my home now."

"It doesn't have to be." Rapidfury clamped his paws around Fury's, desperate. "Please, Fury. You're my only friend now!"

"But I don't have to be." Fury flicked his tail in the direction of the camp. "Connect with the living and let the dead rest."

Rapidfury looked away. He retracted his paws. “You’re right.” He muttered, clenching his jaws. “Again.”

Fury patted him on the back, slowly. “I’ll be on my way now.” He booped his muzzle to the top of Rapidfury’s head. “I’m very proud of ya. You’ve come so far. Now, be who ya were always meant to be and *leave a legend.*”

Fury turned to pad away one last time. He had almost vanished into the trees when—

“Fury?” Rapidfury called him back. He needed to say one last thing.

Fury paused in his tracks. He twitched his ears, but said nothing.

Rapidfury struggled to form words for a second. Then, softly. “Thank you.”

For a second, Fury was silent. Then, he turned his gaze to the young deputy’s and smiled. A genuine one. A proud one. It wasn’t a smirk, it wasn’t sharp. Just *real.* But it didn’t quite meet his eyes. Then, softly— “Happy to do it.”

And so, the Dark Forester turned around again and vanished into the trees, never to be seen again.

Rapidfury looked after him for a moment longer, then, he took a deep breath and started to make his way back to RiverClan’s camp.

It would take a while to adjust, he knew.

But something inside — something that still clung onto the little spark of hope he had — told him that, perhaps, it would be worth it.

Perhaps, he could leave a legend after all.

Epilogue →

``...

The night was young. Though the difference between young and old was rather narrow here, in the Dark Forest.

"How is he?" Orange eyes glowed from the dark.

"Perfect." My black tail tip tail curled around my black paws. "He will do just fine."

"Great." Starlight glittered in the dark. "Then welcome to StarClan."

To Be Continued.

→ *Afterword* →

Thank you so much for reading this far.

I hope this story has left something in your heart in a positive way.

Again, thank you so much, and have an amazing day/night 💙

Up Next:

📄 ›› ➿ • warriors - II, ready, set, run • ➿ ‹‹

→ *About the Author* →

River C. Nacilla started her writing journey in secret. At just the age of eleven, her imagination blossomed from the first words of which her eyes landed upon. Immediately, she was imagining vivid worlds filled with creatures from both myth and legend, carving her own unseen legacy amongst her family of four and friends of few.

Despite what it may seem, Nacilla wasn't always a writer. For the longest time of her life, she was fixed on never willingly flipping the page of any work of literature. It was an unexpected turn when suddenly a series caught her interest and held it tight from the first few pages. Since then, she has been inspired by a number of tales and songs, each word and melody fueling the flame of her now fierce love for the work of mankind.

Now, Nacilla is both a narrative writer, a poet, a songwriter, an aspiring musician, and an artist. She is currently posted in a rural city in Northern Alabama, living a quiet life with her deep south roots. She appreciates the works of fantasy, si–fi, action, thrillers, horror, and many more genres. With years of practice on her hands, she is hopeful that she could impact the world of literature, if only in some way.

Each star has its own story.
You look at them every night,
Though they fade before your eyes.
Tell me, dear reader, what do you wish for?